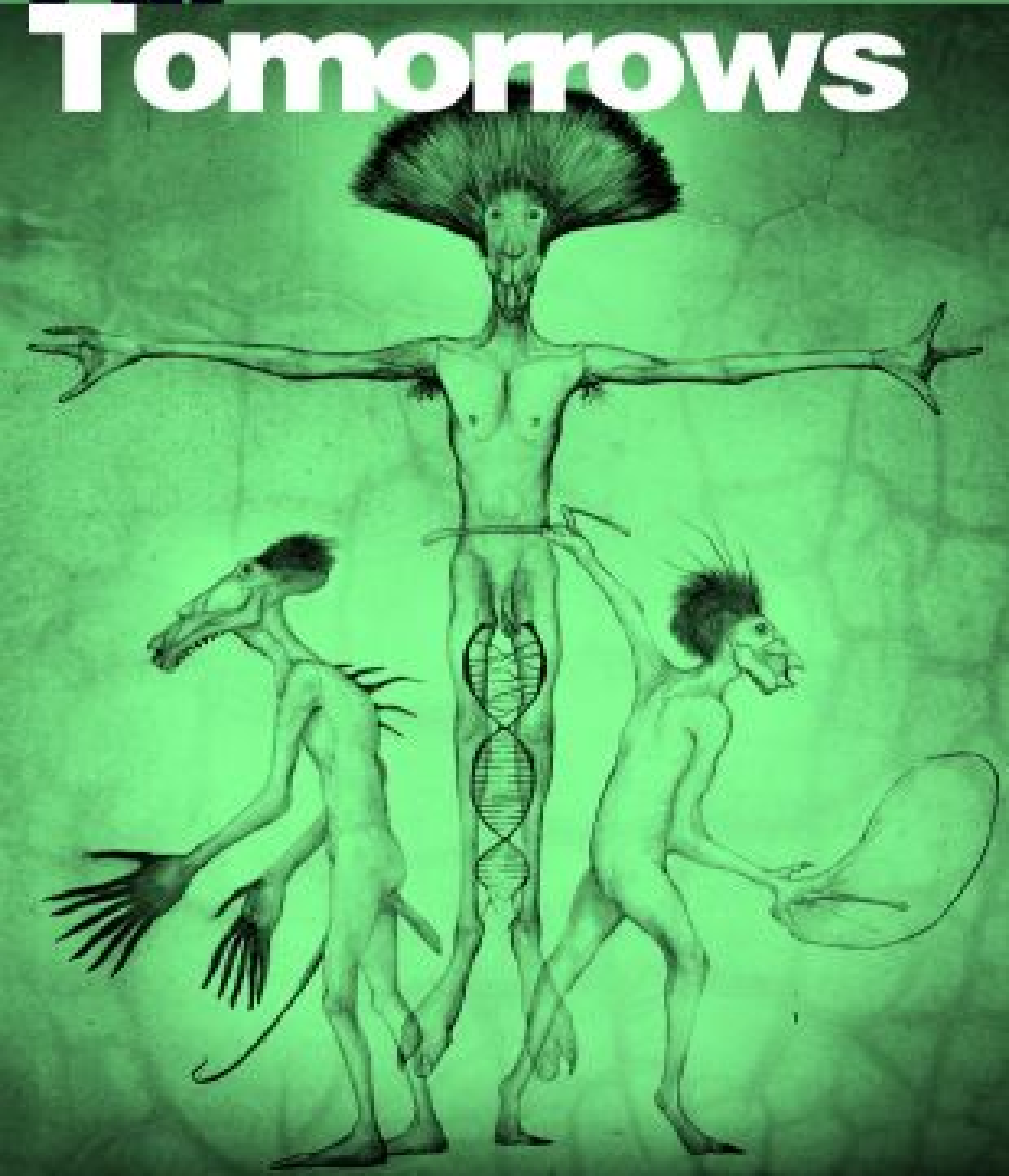
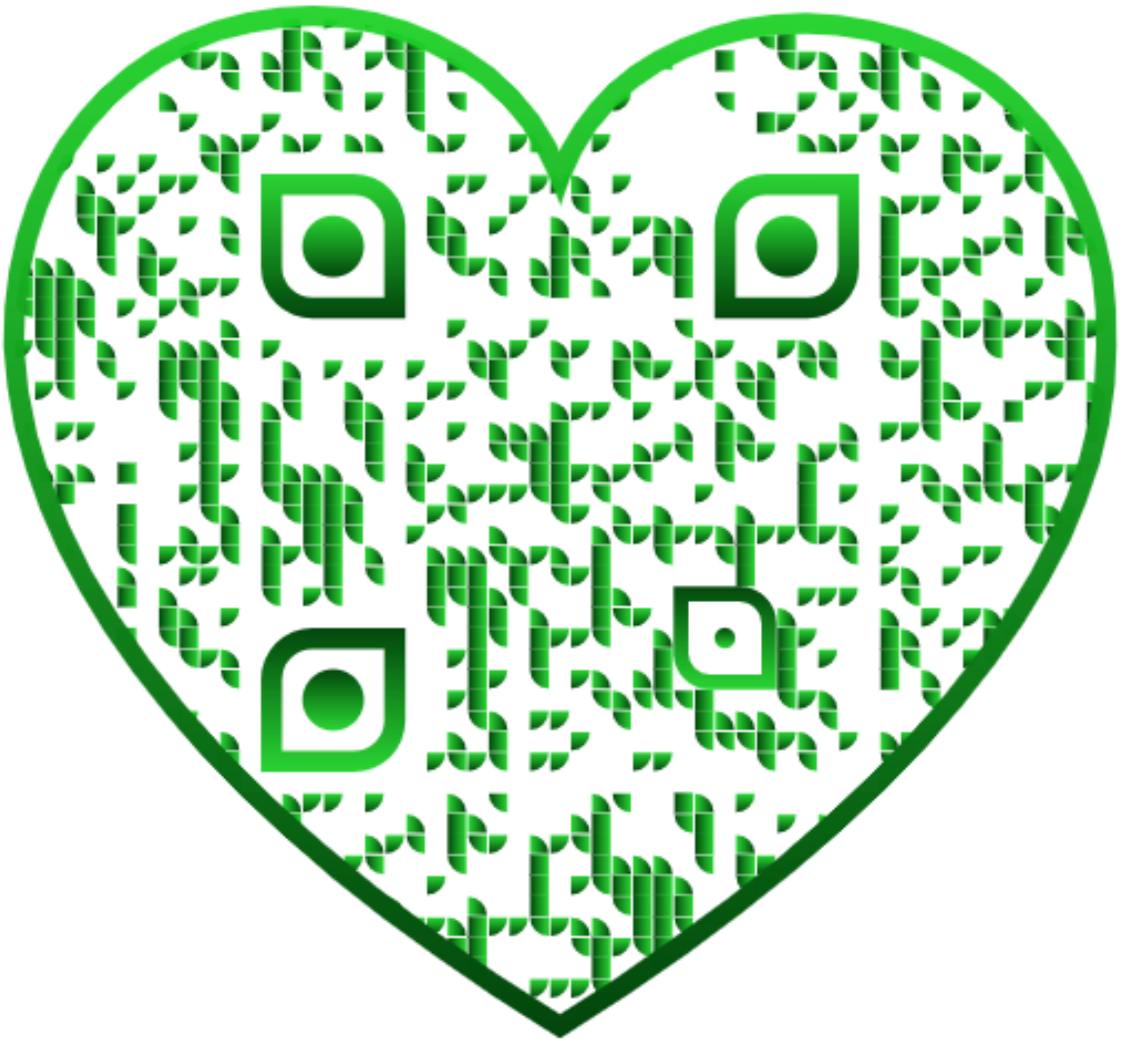
All Tomorrows

The Myriad Species and Mixed Fortunes of Man





Nemo Ramjet

Alltomorrows

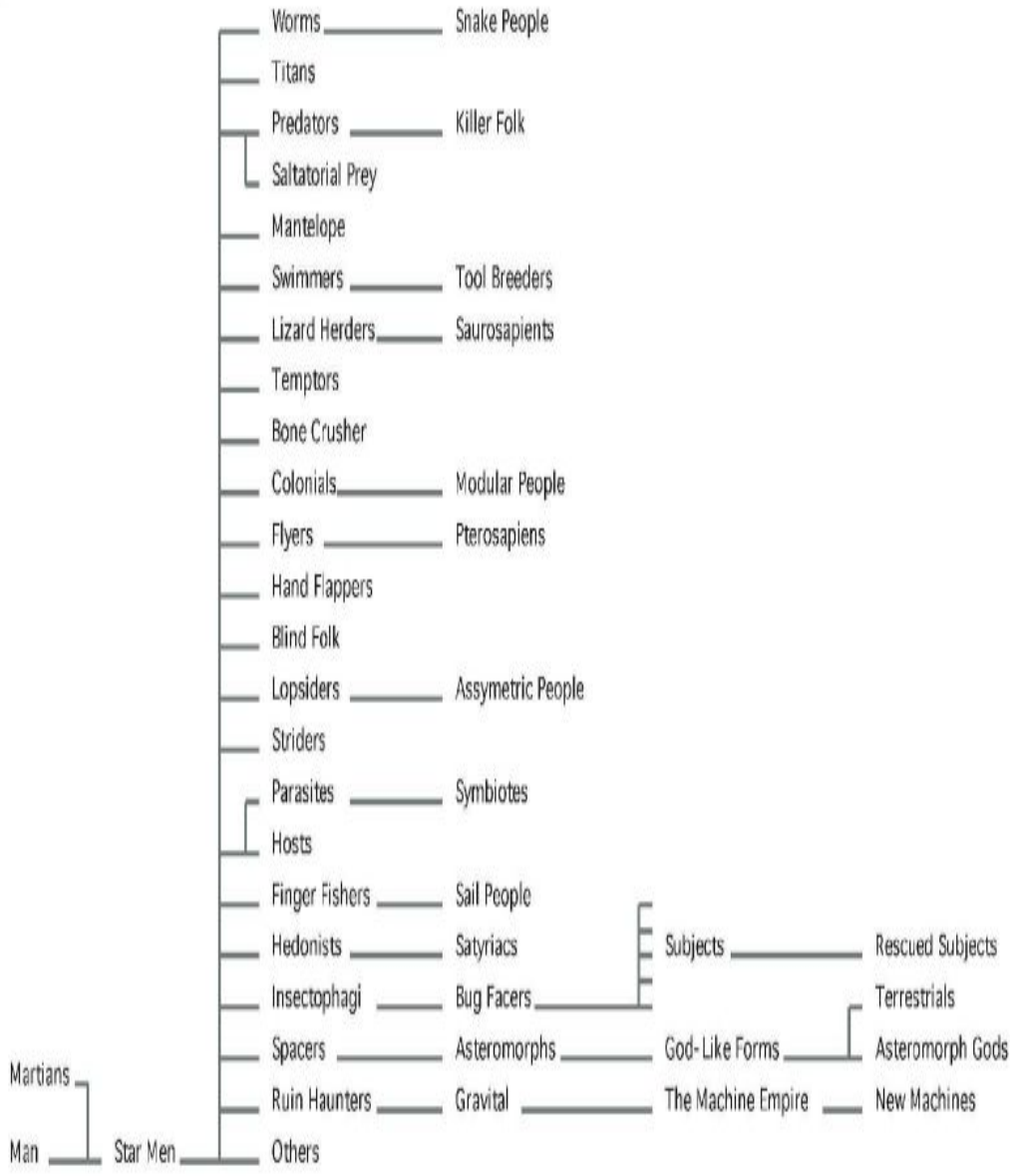
All Tomorrows

A Billion Year Chronicle of the Myriad Species and Varying Fortunes of Man

Nemo Ramjet

Timeline

Species



Historical Events

Civil War	Summer of Man	Qu Invasion	Extinction and Diversification	The Second Empire	Machine Invasion	Machine-Asteromorph Wars	Second Contact	Galactic Unity	All Tomorrows

To Mars

After millennia of earthbound foreplay, Mankind's achievements on a noteworthy level began with its political unification and the gradual colonization of Mars. While the technology to colonize this world had existed for some time, political bickering, shifting agendas and the sheer inertia of comfortable, terrestrial usurping had made this step seem more distant than it actually was.

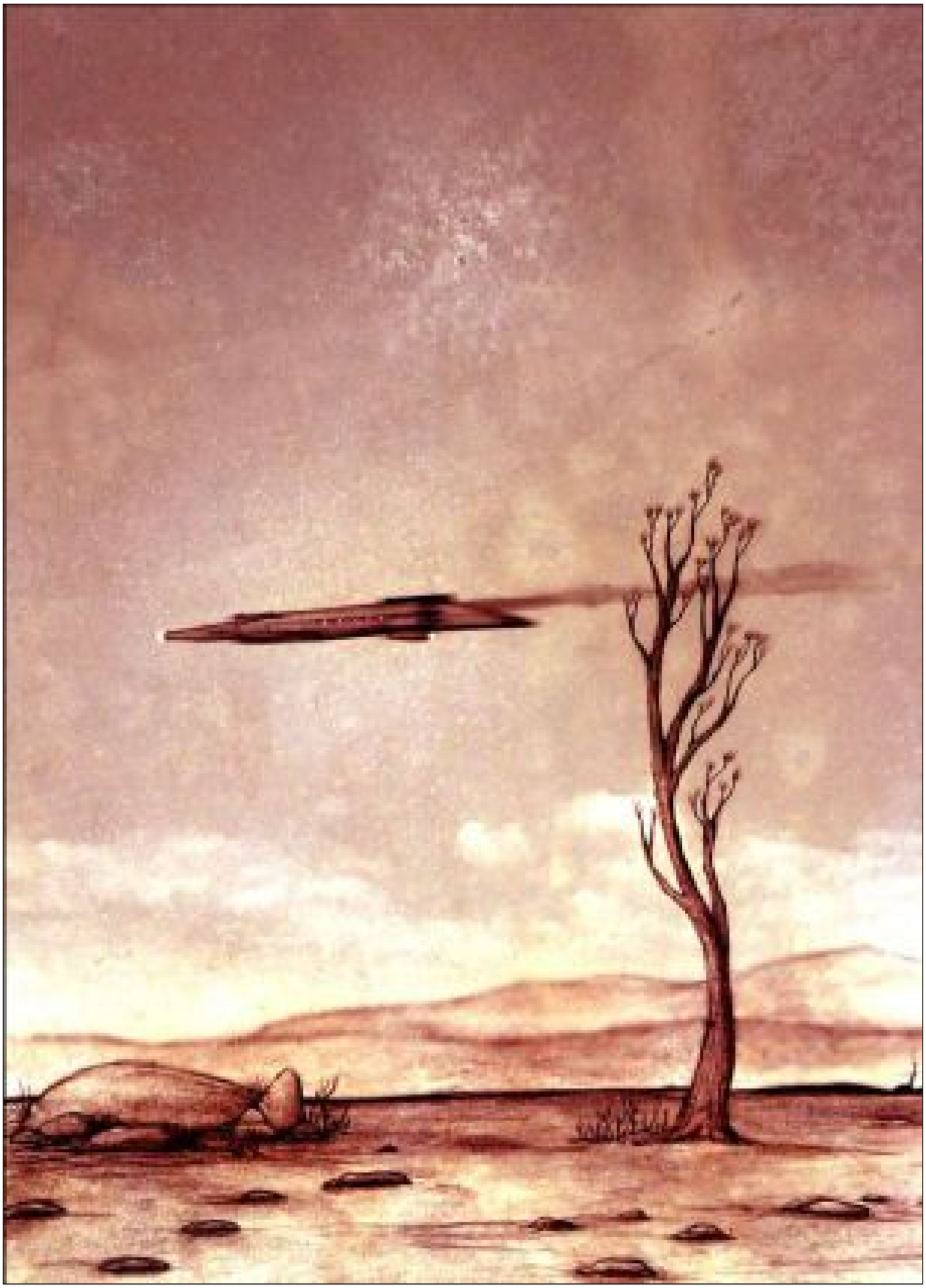
Only when the risks clearly began to present themselves, only when Earth's environment began to buckle under the strain of twelve billion industrialized souls, did Mankind finally take up the momentous task.

All through the decades, traveling to, and later settling on Mars had been envisioned as quick, relatively easy affairs; complicated but feasible and manageable in short term. As the push finally came to a shove, it was realized that this was not the case.

It had to go step by step. Atmospheric bombardment by genetically-tailored microbes slowly generated a breathable atmosphere in a cycle that took centuries. Later, a few cometary fragments were knocked off-course to bring forth seas, oceans; water. When the wait was finally over, remnants of Earth's flora and fauna were introduced as specially-modified Martian remakes.

When everything was ready, people came from their crowded world. They came in one-way ships; fusion rockets and atmospheric gliders, packed to the brim with colonists, sleeping in dreams of a new beginning.

The first steps on Mars were taken not by astronauts, but by barefoot children on synthetic grass.



A lander ferries the first people to the pre-terraformed eden of Mars.

The Martian Americans

For several hundred years Mars remained as a backwater; prospering but still dim compared to the splendor of Earth, which was glowing brighter than ever before. Thanks to the relocation of environmentally demanding industries to Mars, Earth could usurp everything, without having to damage its tired biosphere. This was the Terrestrial Heyday; the climax of economic, cultural and social development on old Earth.

This, however, was not to last. Like the gradual separation of America from her Colonial mother, the governments of Mars adopted a new, Martian identity. They became the Martian Americans.

The difference between Earth and the Mars was not only political. A few generations in the lighter gravity gave the new Americans a spindly, lithe frame that would look surreal in their old home. This, combined with a certain amount of genetic engineering, took the Martians' separation to a new level.

For a while the silent schism between the two planets was mutually accepted, and the balance of power hung in an edgy equilibrium. But the Terra-Martian standoff did not, could not last forever. With limitless resources and an energetic population, Mars was bound to take the lead.

Civil War

The Martian turnover was expected to occur in two ways; either through long-term economical gains or by a much shorter but painful armed conflict. For almost two hundred years, the former method seemed to take effect, but this gradual stretch eventually did break in a most destructive way.

Almost since its establishment, Martian culture was suffused with an explicit theme of rebellion against Earth. Songs, motion pictures and daily publications repeated these notions again and again until they became internalized. Earth was the old, ossified home that held humanity back, while Mars was new; dynamic, active and inventive. Mars was the future.

This ideology eventually reached its semi-paranoid, revolutionary apex. Roughly a thousand years from now, the nations of Mars banned all non-essential trade and travel with Earth.

For Earth, it was a death sentence. Without the resources and industries of Mars, the Terrestrial Heyday would quickly devolve into a pale shadow of its former glory. Since a trade of essential goods continued, nobody would starve. But for every citizen of Earth, the Martian boycott meant the loss of up to three fourths of their yearly income.

Earth had no choice but to reclaim its former privileges, by force if necessary. Centuries after her political unification, Terra geared up for war.

Most thinkers (and fantasists) of previous times had imagined interplanetary war as a glorious, fast paced spectacle of massive spaceships, one-man fighters and last-minute heroics. No fantasy could have been further from the truth. War between planets was a slow, nerve-wracking series of precisely timed decisions that spelled destruction on biblical scales.

Most of the time the combatants never saw each other. Most of the time the combatants were not there at all. War became a duel between complicated, autonomous machines programmed to maximize damage to the other side while trying to last a little longer.

Such a conflict caused horrendous destruction on both sides. Phobos, one of Mars' moons, was shattered, and rained down as meteorite hail. Earth received a polar impact that killed of one third of its population.

Barely escaping extinction, the peoples of Earth and Mars made peace and re-forged a united solar system. It had cost them more than eight billion souls.

Star People

The survivors agreed that massive changes were necessary to ensure that such a war never occurred again. These reforms were so comprehensive that they entailed not political, economical but biological changes as well.

One of the greatest differences between the people of the two planets was that over time, they had almost become different species. It was believed that the solar system could never completely unify until this discrepancy was overcome.

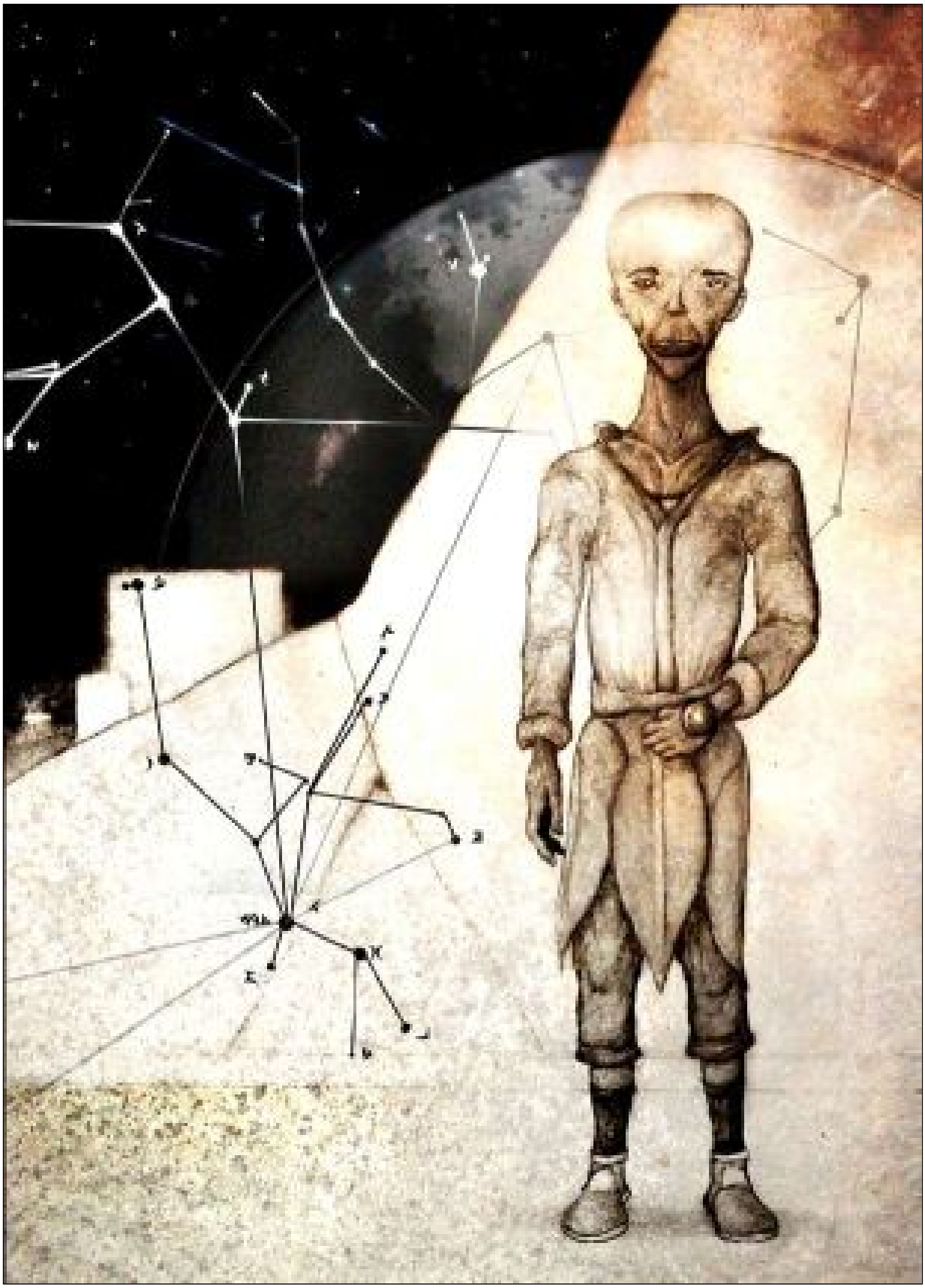
The answer was a new human subspecies, equally and better adapted not only to Earth and Mars, but to the conditions of most newly terraformed environments as well. Furthermore, these beings were envisioned with larger brains and heightened talents, making them greater than the sum of their predecessors.

Normally, it would be hard to convince any population to make a choice between mandatory sterilization and parenting a newfangled race of superior beings. However, memories of the war were still painfully fresh, and it was easier to implement these radical procedures in the wake of such slaughter. Any resistance to the birth

of the new species did not extend beyond meager complaints and trivial strikes.

In only a few generations, the new race began to prove its worth. Organized as a single state and aided by the technological developments of the war, they rapidly terraformed and colonized Venus, the Asteroids and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn.

Soon however, even the domain of Sol grew too small. The new people who inherited it wanted to go further, to new worlds under distant stars. They were to become the Star People.



Colonization and the Mechanical Oedipi

Even for the Star People, interplanetary travel was a momentous task. Early minds had boggled over the problem and fantasies such as faster than light travel and hyperspace emerged as the only “solutions”.

Simply put, it was impossible to take a large number of people with enough supplies to even the closest star to make colonization feasible. The existing technologies could only slug along at mere percentages of lightspeed, making the journey an epoch-spanning affair. Enormous “generation ships” were conceived and even built, but these succumbed to technical difficulties or on-board anarchy after a few cycles.

The solution was to first go there, and make the colonists later. To this end, fast and small, automated ships were sent forth to the stars. On board were semi-sentient machines programmed to replicate and terraform the destination, and “construct” its inhabitants from the genetic materials stored on board.

A bizarre problem plagued such attempts. The first generation of humans to be manufactured sometimes developed a strange affection for the machines that made them. They rejected their own kind and perished after the massive identity crisis that followed. This technological Oedipus complex was not uncommon; nearly half of all the colony-founding attempts were lost through it.

Even then, however, the remaining half was enough to fill Humanity’s own spiral arm of the galaxy.

The Summer of Man

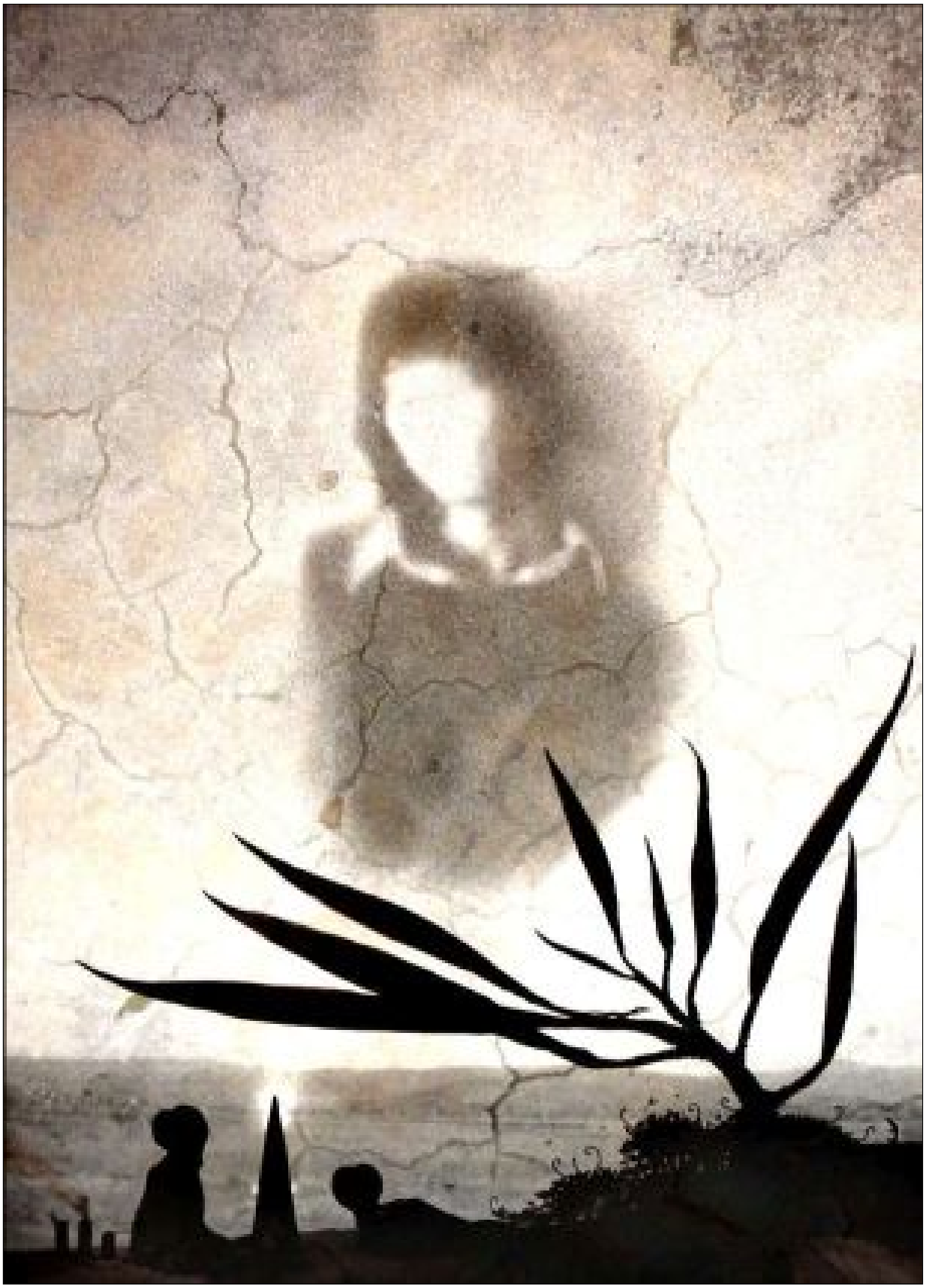
Right after Mankind's colonization of the galaxy came its first true golden age. Reared by machine prophets, the survivors of the Oedipal plagues built civilizations that equaled and even surpassed their Solar forbears.

This diffusion across the heavens did not mean a loss of unity. Across the skies, steady flows of electromagnetic communication linked Mankind's worlds with such efficiency that there was no colony that did not know about the goings on of her distant siblings. The free-flow of information meant, among other things; a vastly accelerated pace of technological growth. What couldn't be figured out in one world was helped out by another, and any new developments were quickly made known to all in a realm that spanned centuries of light.

Not surprisingly, living standards rose to previously unimaginable levels. While this did not exactly mean a galactic utopia, it was safe to say that people of the colonized galaxy lived lives in which labor; both menial and mental, was purely compulsory. Thanks to the richness of the heavens and the toil of machines, each person had access to material and cultural wealth greater than that of some nations today.

During all this development, a curious phenomenon was observed. While alien life was abundant in the stars, no one had encountered any signs of true intelligence. Some attributed this to an overall rarity, while others went as far as divine influence; resurrecting religion.

Regardless of the theorizing, one question went truly and utterly unanswered. What would really happen, if mankind ever ran into his equals or superiors in space?



Two star people watch a holographic movie as they lounge under the remnants of their colonized world's indigenous flora. For them, it is a life of continual bliss.

An Early Warning

During those times, a small discovery of immense implications warned humanity that it might not be alone.

On a newly colonized world, engineers had stumbled across the remains of a puzzling creature, considered so because it had every hallmark of terrestrial animals on an alien planet. Justifiably named Panderavis pandora, the colossal fossil belonged to a bird-like creature with enormous claws. Later research determined it to be a highly derived therizinosaur, from a lineage of herbivorous dinosaurs that died out millions of years ago on Earth.

While every other large land animal on that colony world had three limbs, a copper based skeletal system and hydrostatically operated muscles; Panderavis was a typical terrestrial vertebrate with calcium-rich bones and four extremities. Finding it there was as unlikely as finding an alien creature in Earth's own strata.

For some, it was irrefutable proof of divine creation. The religious resurgence, fueled at first by mankind's apparent loneliness in the heavens, got even more intensified.

Others saw it differently. Panderavis had shown humans that entities; powerful enough to visit Earth, take animals from there and adapt them to an alien world, were at large in the galaxy. Considering the time gulf of the fossil itself, the mysterious beings were millennia older than humanity when they were capable of such things.

The warning was clear. There was no telling what would happen if mankind suddenly ran into this civilization. A benevolent contact was obviously preferred and even expected, but it paid to be prepared.

Silently, humanity once again began to build and stockpile weapons, this time of the interplanetary potency. There were terrible devices, capable of nova-ing stars and wrecking entire solar systems. Sadly, even these preparations would prove to be ineffectual in time.

A reconstruction of Panderavis shows the creature’s rake like claws, with which it dug furrows in the soil to find its food. Opportunistic local animals walk alongside Panderavis, looking for morsels left over from its feasting.

Qu

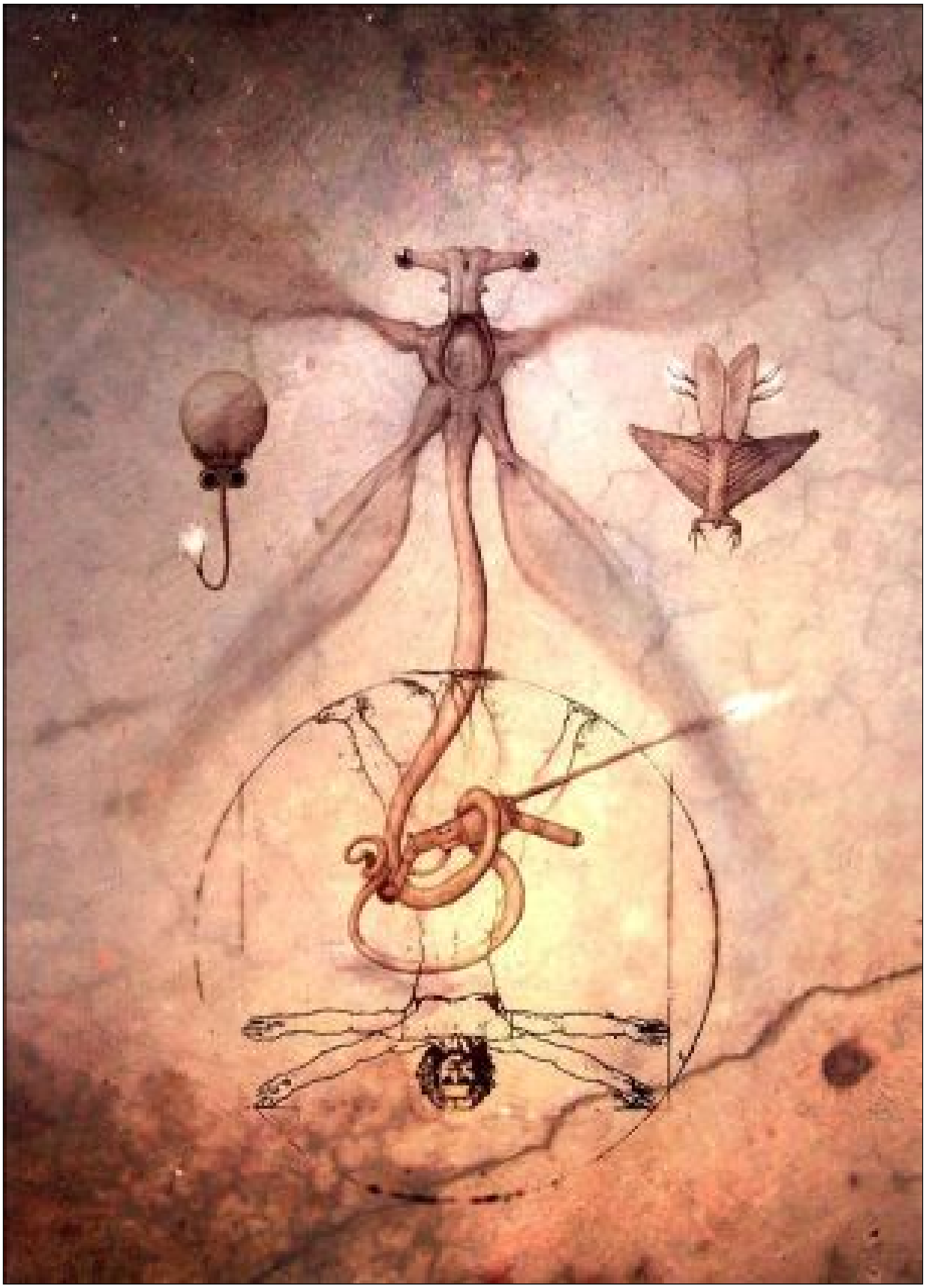
The first contact was bound to happen. The galaxy, let alone the Universe was simply too big for just a singular species to develop intelligence in. Any delay in contact only meant a heightening of the eventual culture shock. In humanity's case, this "culture shock" meant the complete extinction of mankind as it had come to be known.

Almost a billion years old, the alien species known as Qu were galactic nomads, traveling from one spiral arm to another in epoch-spanning migrations. During their travels they constantly improved and changed themselves until they became masters of genetic and nanotechnological manipulation. With this ability to control the material world, they assumed a religious, self-imposed mission to "remake the universe as they saw fit." Powerful as gods, Qu saw themselves as the divine harbingers of the future.

This dogma was rooted in what had been a benevolent attempt to protect the race from its own power. However, blind, unquestioning obedience had made monsters of the Qu.

To them humanity, with all of its relative glories, was nothing more than a transmutable subject. Within less than a thousand years, every human world was destroyed, depopulated or even worse; changed. Despite the fervent rearmament, the colonies could achieve nothing against its billionyear-old foes, save for a few flashes of ephemeral resistance.

Humanity, once the ruler of the stars, was now extinct. However, humans were not.



Qu triumphant in the fall of Man. To his left floats a nanotechnological drone, to the right, a genetically modified tracing creature.

Man Extinguished

The worlds of humanity, gardens of terraformed paradise, seemed strangely empty to the Qu. Often there were no raw materials available other than people, their cities and a few basic niches of ecology, populated by genetically modified animals and plants from Earth. This was because humans had erased the original alien ecologies in the first place.

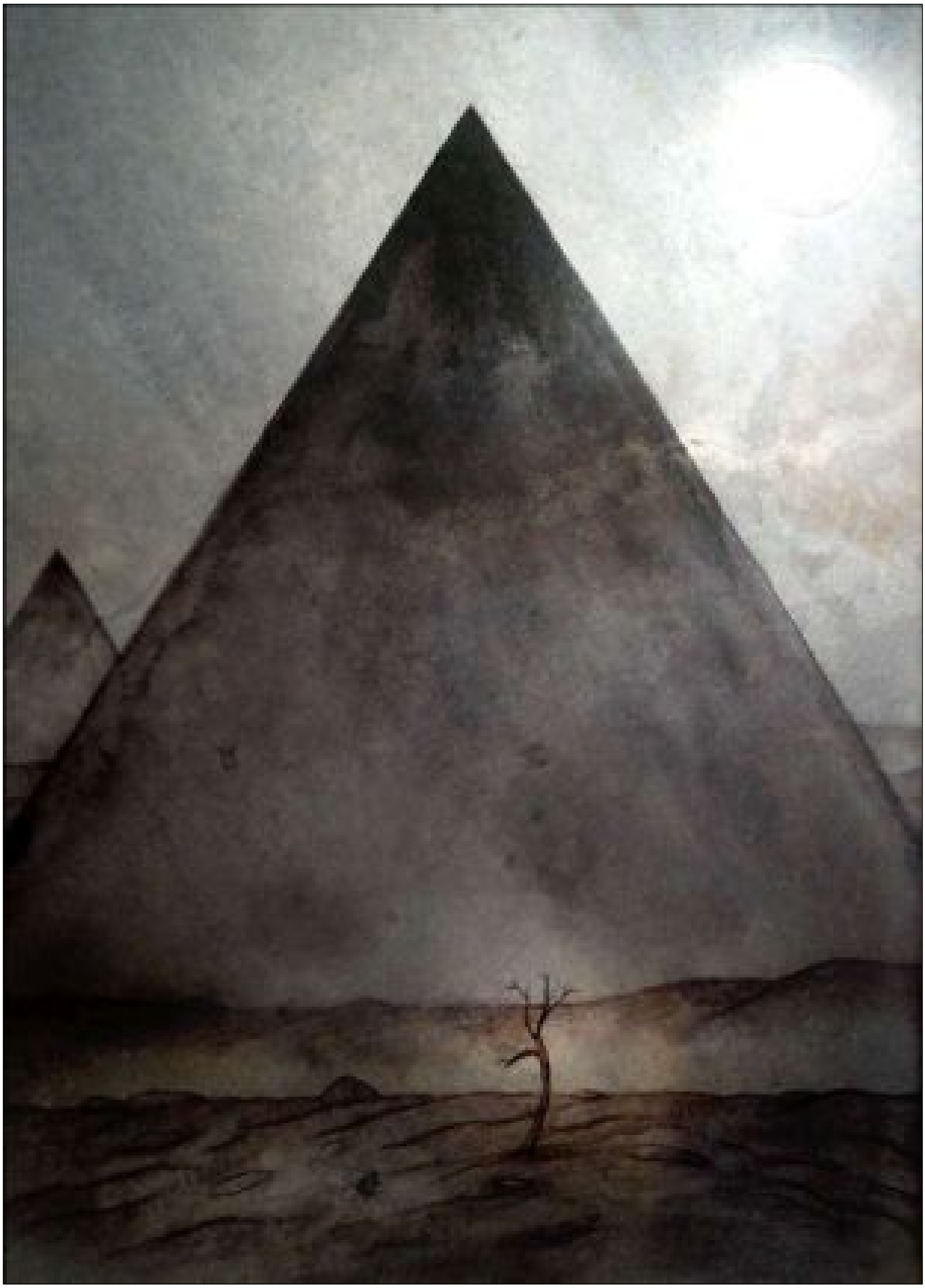
Offended by another race trying to remake the universe, the Qu set forth to punish these “infidels” by using them as the building materials of their vision. While this led to a complete extinguishment of human sentience, it also saved the species by preserving its genetic heritage in a myriad of strange new forms.

Populated by ersatz humans, now in every guise from wild animals to pets to genetically modified tools, Qu reigned supreme for forty million years on the worlds of our galaxy. They erected kilometer-high monuments and changed the surfaces of entire worlds, apparently to whim.

One day, they departed as they had come. For theirs was a never-ending quest and they would not, could not stop until they had swept through the entire cosmos.

Behind them the Qu left a thousand worlds, each filled with bizarre creatures and ecologies that had once been men. Most of them perished right after their caretakers left, others lasted a little longer to succumb to long-term instabilities. On a precious few worlds, descendants of people actually managed to survive.

In them lay the fate of the species, now divided and differentiated beyond recognition.



A mile high Qu pyramid towers over the silent world that once housed four billion souls. Such structures are the hallmark of Qu, and they can be seen on every habitable world they passed through.

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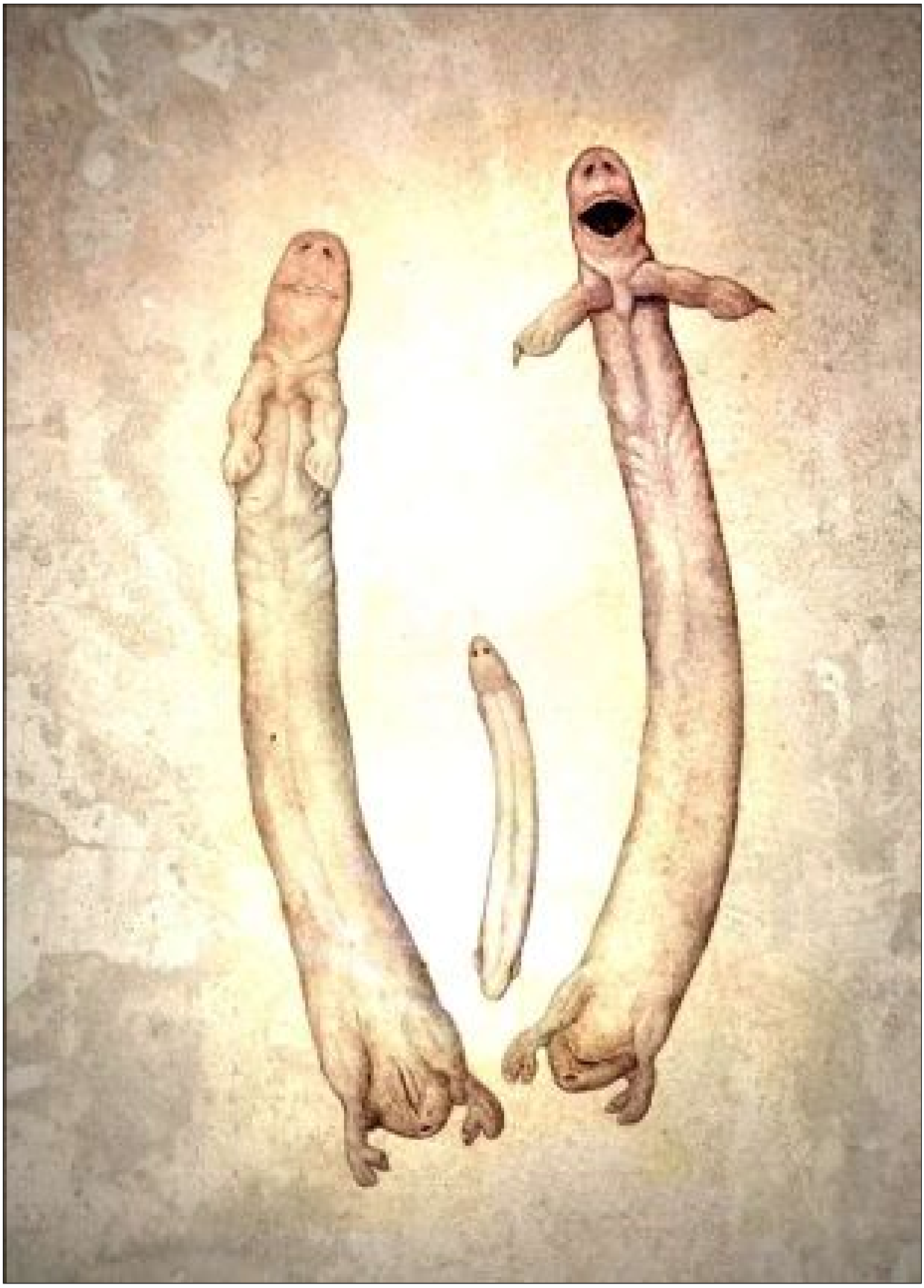
Worms

Their world lay under a scorching sun, its intensity made monstrous through the interventions of the bygone Qu. The surface lay littered with husks of dead cities, baking endlessly like shattered statues in a derelict oven.

Yet life remained on this unforgiving place. Forests of crystalline “plants” blanketed the surface, recycling oxygen for the animal life that teemed underground. One such species, barely longer than the arms of their ancestors, was the sole surviving vertebrate. Furthermore, it was that planet’s last heir of the star people.

Distorted beyond recognition by genetic modification, they looked for all the word like pale, overgrown worms. Tiny, feeble feet and hands modified for digging were all that betrayed their noble heritage. Aside from these organs, all was simplified for the life underground. Their eyes were pinpricks, they lacked teeth, external ears and the better half of their nervous system.

The lives of these ersatz people did not extend beyond digging aimlessly. If they encountered food, they devoured it. If they encountered others of their kind, they sometimes devoured them too. But mostly they mated and multiplied, and managed to preserve a single shred of their humanity in their genes. In time, it would do them good.



Two Worm parents with their young.

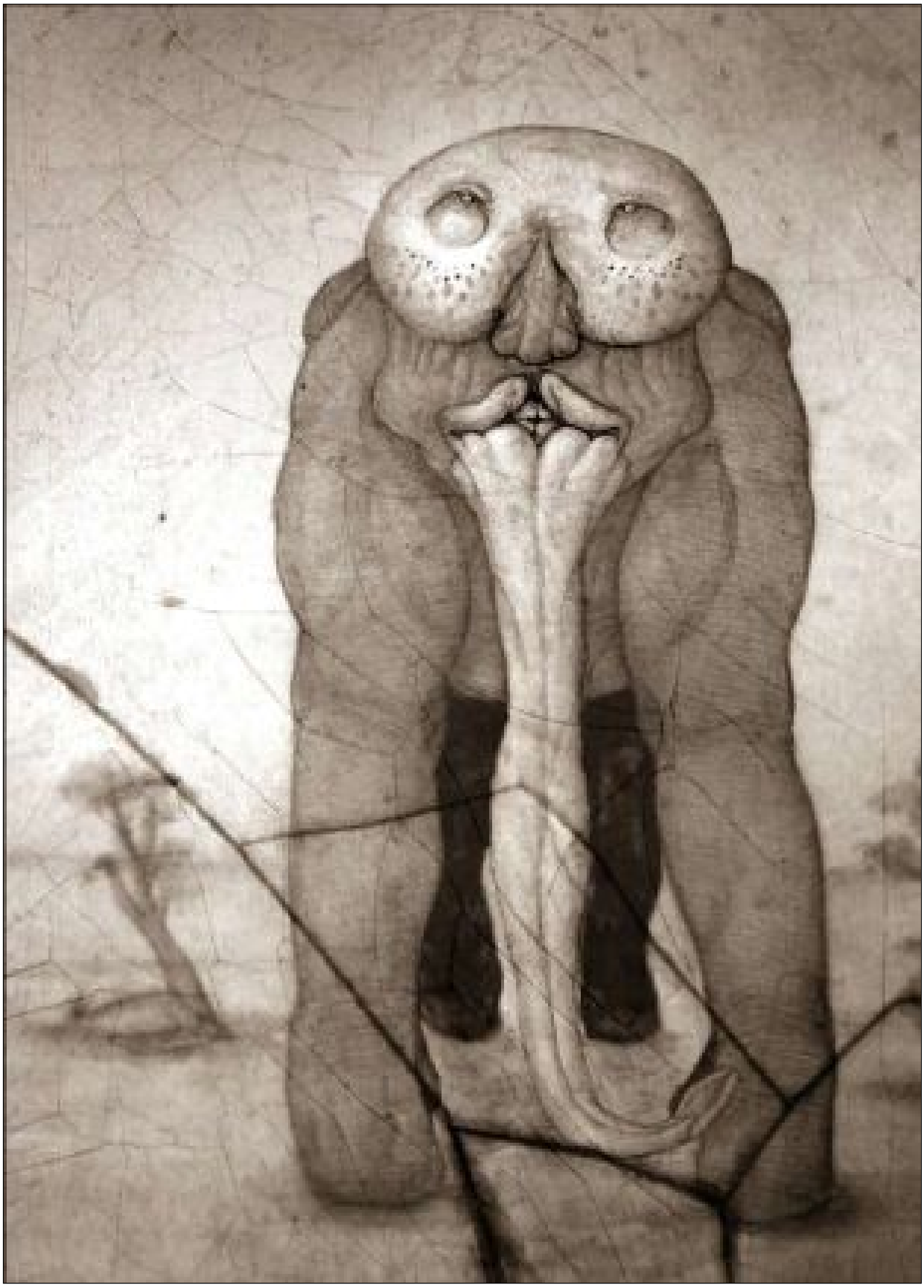
Titans

On the endless savannah of a long-extinguished colonial outpost, enormous beasts roamed supreme. More than forty meters long by terrestrial measurements, these behemoths were actually the transmuted offspring of the Star People.

Several features betrayed their human ancestry. They still retained stubby thumbs on their elephantine front feet, now useless for any sort of precise manipulation except for uprooting trees. They compensated this loss by developing their lower lip into a muscular, trunk like organ that echoed the elephants of Earth's past.

As bestial as they seemed, the Titans were among the smartest of the reduced sub-men that remained in the galaxy. Their hulking stance allowed for a developed brain and gradually, sentience re-emerged. With their lip-trunks they fashioned ornate wood carvings, erected hangar-like dwellings and even began a form of primitive agriculture. With settled life came the inevitable flood of language and literature; myths and legends of the bygone, half-remembered past were told in booming voices across the vast plains.

It was easy to see that, within a few hundred thousand years, Humanity could start again with these titanic primitives. Sadly, as a catastrophic ice-age took over the Titans' homeworld the gentle giants disappeared, never to return.

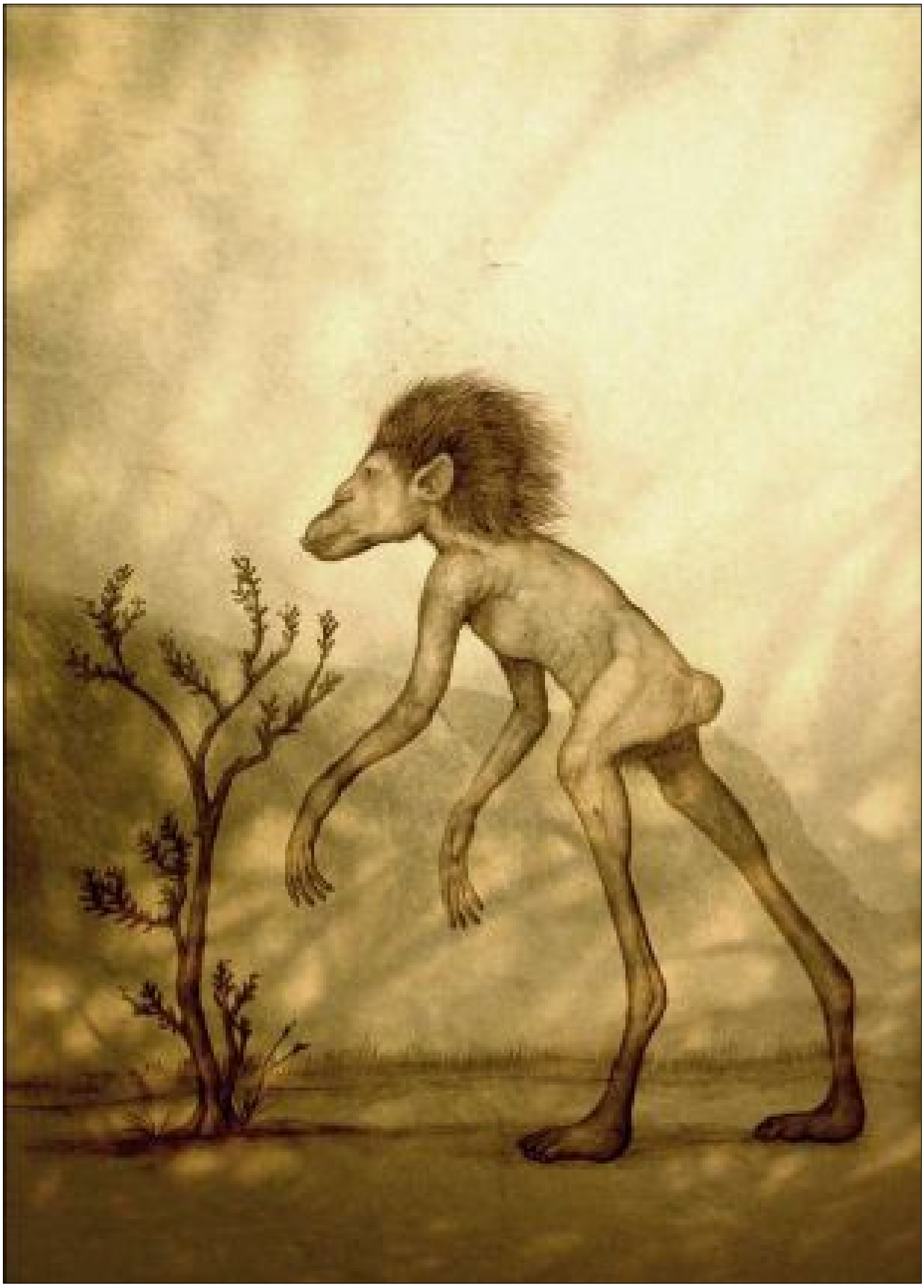


Predators and Prey

Devolved predators were common among humanity's feral worlds. Most of the time they resembled the vampires, werewolves and goblins of bygone lore; hunting equally sub-human prey with a combination of derived weaponry. Some had enormous heads with large, killing teeth. Others tore their victims apart with talon-like feet. But the most common kinds bore modified fingers and thumbs, bristling with razor-sharp claws.

The most efficient of these predators lived on one of mankind's first off-world colonies. In addition to paw-like hands with switchblade thumbs they also had gaping, tooth studded jaws on disproportionate heads with large, sensitive ears. All of these served to make them the dominant predators on their home planet.

They ran the prairies, stalked the forests and ranged through the mountains in pursuit of different people; herbivorous saltators with bird-like legs. While their prey lapsed into complete animosity, the hunters managed to keep the spark of intelligence alive in their evolutionary honing.



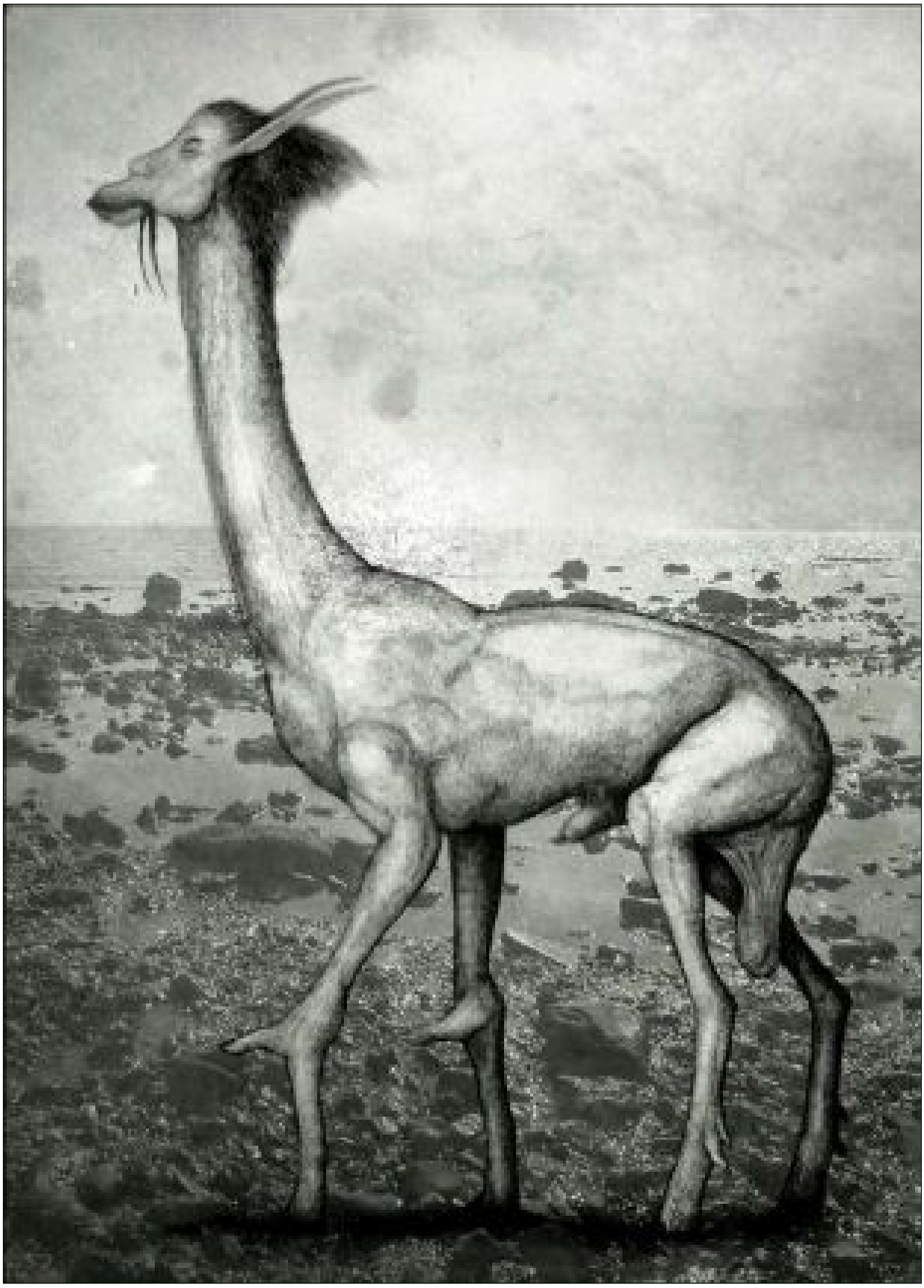
Mantelopes

Not all devolved people lapsed into complete bestiality. Some held on to their minds, while losing all of their physiological advantages to the genetic meddling of the Qu.

A singular species was a prime exemplar. They had been bred as singers and memoryretainers, acting much like living recorders during the reign of Qu. When their masters left they barely survived, reverting into a quadrupedal stance and occupying a niche as grazing herd animals. This change was so abrupt that the newly evolved Mantelopes endured only due to the forgiving sterility of their artificial biosphere.

The Mantelopes, equipped with full (if slightly numbed) Human minds and completely disabled animal bodies, lived agonizing lives. They could see and understand the world around them, but due to their bodies they could do nothing to change it. For centuries, mournful herds roamed the plains, singing songs of desperation and loss. Entire religions and oral traditions were woven around this crippling racial disability, as dramatic and detailed as any on bygone Earth.

Fortunately, the selective forces of evolution made their agony a short-lived one. Simply put, a brain was not advantageous to develop if it could not be put into good use. A dim-witted, half minded Mantelope grew up faster than a smart one, and grazed just as efficiently. The Mantelopes' animal children overtook them in less than a hundred thousand years, and their melancholic world fell silent for good. Nothing was sacred in the evolutionary process.



Swimmers

Perhaps because their life cycle involved an aquatic larval stage, the Qu had transmuted a large number of their human subjects into a bewildering array of aquatic creatures. Taken care of by specially-bred attendants, these post-human water babies came in every shape and size imaginable. There were limbless, ribbon like varieties of eel-people, huge, whale like behemoths, decorative people who swam by squirting water out of their hypertrophied mouths and horrifying multitudes of brainless wallowers that served as food stock.

All of them were perfectly domesticated. All of them went extinct when their masters left. All save a few lightly mutated, generalized forms. These swimmers still resembled their human ancestors to a large degree; they had no artificial gills, their hands were still visible through their front flippers, their feet were splayed affairs that functioned like a pair of tail flukes. Recognizably human eyes peeked through their blubbery eyelids and they spoke to each other, though not in words and never in sentient understanding.

For millennia they swam the oceans of their ecologically stunted world, feeding on diversifying kinds of fish and crustaceans; survivors of the food stock originally imported from Earth. With the intervention of the Qu gone, natural selection resumed. The swimmers became more streamlined to better catch their fast prey. The prey responded by getting even faster, or evolving defensive countermeasures such as armor, spikes or poison. Their evolution back on track, the swimmers drifted further and further away from their sentient ancestry. They would wait for a long time indeed to taste that blessing again.

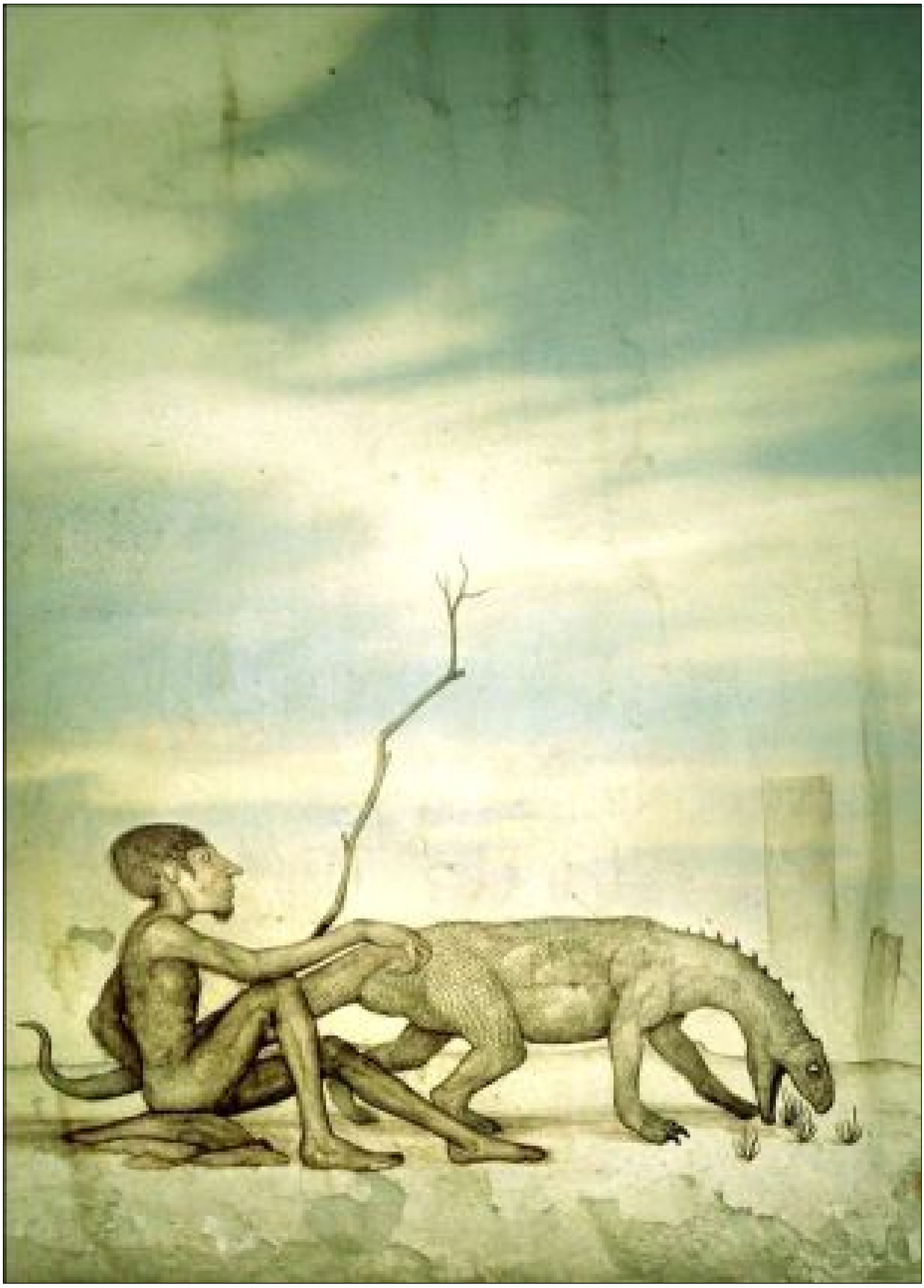
Lizard Herders

They were the lucky ones. Instead of unrecognizably distorting them as they had done to most of their subjects, the Qu had merely erased their sentience and stunted the development of their brains.

Distantly resembling their ancient forebears on Earth, the primitives led feral lives for an unnaturally long time. They never regained sentience after the Qu left, despite having every incentive to do so. This was partially due to the total absence of predators on their garden world, resulting in no advantage for intelligence. Furthermore, the Qu had made some small but integral changes to their brains, tweaking with the structure of cerebellum so that certain features associated with heuristic learning could never emerge again. Once again, the reasons for these baffling changes remained known only to the Qu.

The dumb people eventually settled in a symbiosis with some of the other creatures that inhabited their planet. They began to instinctively “farm” some of the large, herbivorous reptiles, ancestors of which were brought from Earth as pets.

Soon the balance of this mutualism began to tip in the reptiles’ favor. The tropical climate of the planet gave them an inherent advantage, and they underwent a spectacular radiation of different species. They encountered no competition from the only large mammals on the planet; the brain-neutered descendants of the starfarers. Faced with a reptilian turnover, the only adaptation the sub-men could muster was to slip quietly into bestial oblivion.



A lizard herder scans the world with blank eyes as his stock grow stronger and smarter. The future does not seem to belong to him.

Temptor

In the Temptors' case, the remodeling was done with an almost artistic enthusiasm. How they managed to survive in their bizarre form was not clear; their ancestors were used as sessile decoration and through some miracle of adaptation they had endured.

No human would have recognized them as their descendants. The females were beaked cones of flesh some two meters tall, rooted in soil like grotesque carnivorous plants. The males on the other hand, resembled contorted, bipedal monkeys. Unlike their mates they were perfectly ambulatory; dozens of them ran around the females' mounds like so many imps. Some would gather food, others would clean the females while others would stand on guard for danger. Although their actions looked purposeful, the males had no will of their own.

In Temptor society, females controlled everything. Using a combination of vocal and phermonal signals, they guided the masculine hordes into any number of menial tasks, while mating with the strongest, the most obedient and the dumbest to produce even better drones. On certain periods they would also give birth to a few precious females, who would be carried away by subservient males to root themselves.

It was a terribly efficient hegemony that would certainly give rise to civilization in a matter of centuries had fate not intervened. As a stray comet obliterated the Temptors' mound forests, one of Humanity's best chances for re-emergence was cruelly swept away.

A male and female Temptor illustrate the sexual discrepancy that is characteristic to their species. Note the female's elongated, pit-like vagina. When mating, the males descend into it like subway commuters.

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Bone Crusher

Through the deliberate modifications of Qu and the blind molding of evolution, the heavens came to be populated with creatures that would put the myths of their ancestors to shame.

Their ancestors were pint-sized pets of Qu that were bred for the dazzling colors of their tooth-derived beaks. When their masters left, most of these pampered creatures died, with no one or nothing left to take care of them.

But some, belonging to the hardiest breeds, survived. In less than a geological eyeblink of a few million years, the descendants of such creatures radiated into the evolutionary vacuum of their garden world. One lineage led to a profusion of human herbivores. These were preyed upon by a variety of enamel-beaked raptors, each evolved to deal with a specific prey. Among these generalized niches were entire assemblages of specialized animals, resembling anything from ibis-billed swamp sifters to splendorous forms with bizarre crests that flared out of their toothy beaks.

There were even secondarily sentient forms, in the shape of the ogre-like bone crushers. To an observer of today they would indeed be the stuff of nightmares; three meters tall and hairy, sporting vicious thumb claws and enormous beaks that suited their scavenging diet.

Despite their shortcomings, these corpse eating primitives were one of the first species to attain intelligence, and although primitive, a level of civilization. All of this proved the fallacy of human prejudice in the posthuman galaxy. A creature could feed on putrefying meat, stink like a grave and express its affection by defecating on others, but it might as well be your own grandchild and the last hope of mankind.

In eventuality, however, not even the bone crushers fulfilled this promise. Their dependency on carrion for food limited their

population severely, and their mediaeval civilizations crumbled after a few uneventful millennia.

Colonials

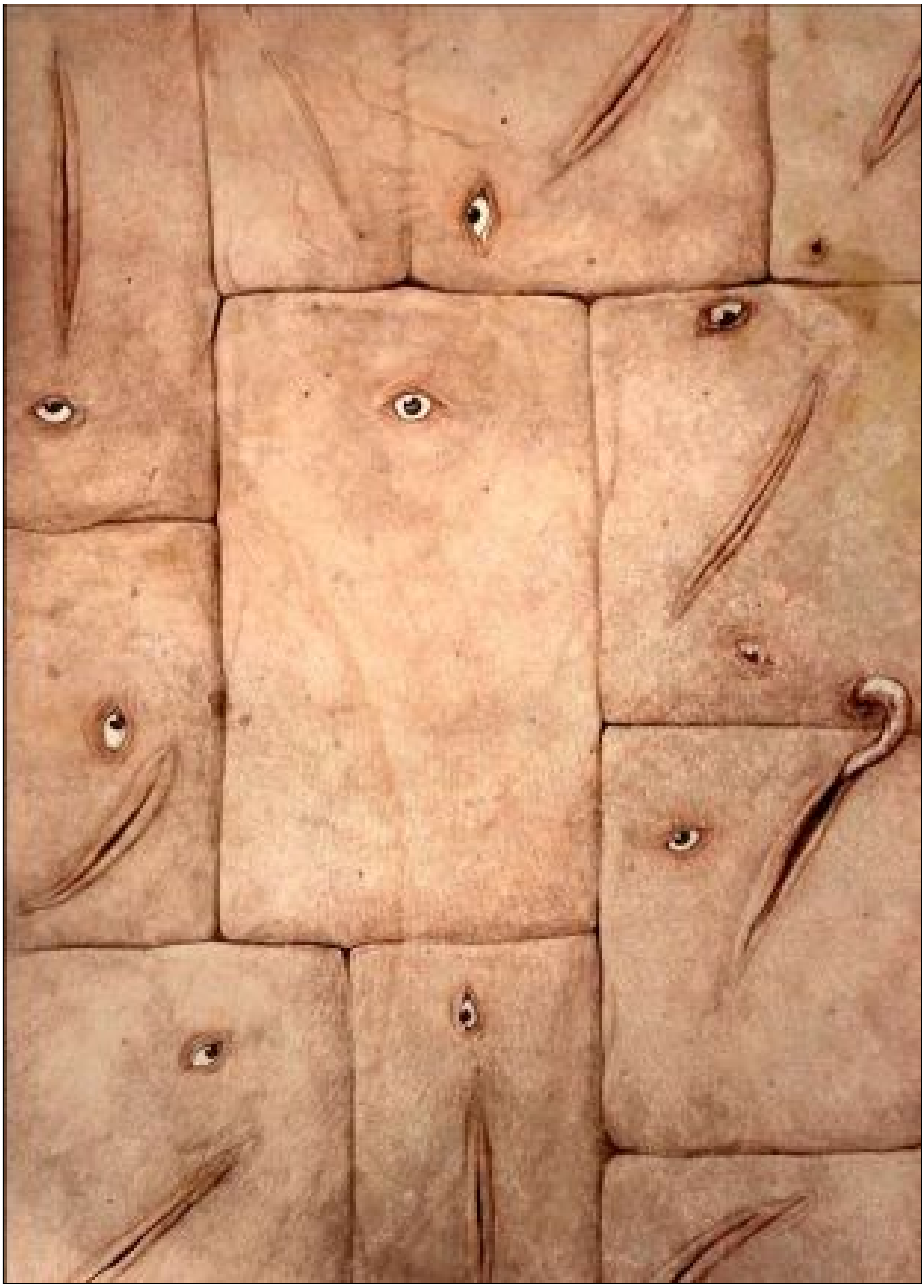
Their world had given the toughest resistance against the Qu onslaught. So tough, in fact, that they had turned back two successive waves of the invaders, only to succumb to the third.

The Qu, with their twisted sense of justice, wanted to make them pay. Even extinction would be too light a punishment for resisting the star gods. The humans of the rogue world needed a sentence that would remind them of their humiliation for generations to come.

So they were made into disembodied cultures of skin and muscle, connected by a skimpy network of the most basic nerves. They were employed as living filtering devices, subsisting on the waste products of Qu civilization like mats of cancer cells. And just to witness and suffer their wretched fate, their eyes, together with their consciousness, were retained.

For forty million years they suffered; generation after generation were born into the most miserable of lives while absorbing the pain of all that they were going through.

When the Qu left, they hoped for a quick extinction. But their lowliness had also made them efficient survivors. Unchecked by the Qu, the colonials spread across the planet in quilt-like fields of human flesh. After an eternity of tortured lives, the human fields tasted something that could almost be described as hope.



A section from a Colonial field shows the misery that compromises their entire lives. Note that these disorganized creatures can reproduce through both asexual and more familiar methods.

Flyers

They were not uncommon at all in the domain of Qu. At least a dozen worlds sported human-derived flying species of one kind or another. Most resembled the bats or the pterosaurs of the bygone past, dancing through the aether like angels. (Or demons, depending on the point of view.) There were a few bizarre kinds relied on swollen gas glands for floatation as well.

Sadly, most of these creatures were already too specialized to be anything but flyers. They had forsaken their humanity for the conquest of the sky; they had little potential for further radiation beyond their limited roles.

The only exception proved out to be a monkey-like species that flew on wing membranes stretched across the last two fingers. Their advantage was a unique, turbine like heart, artificially developed during the regime of Qu. No other human flyer in the galaxy had such an adaptation. The starfish shaped organ sat in the middle of their chests, directly funneling oxygen from the lungs to the bloodstream in a supremely efficient way. This meant that the Flyers could develop energyconsuming adaptations such as large brains without having to give up their power of flight.

Not that the flyers were going to reclaim their sentience right away. Instead, they literally exploded into skies, filling the heavens with anything from bomber-sized sailors to impossibly fast predators that raced with sound. Their world was pristine and there were plenty of niches to play in. Intelligence could wait a little more.

An ancestral Flyer in her native element. Although ungainly, these creatures have an artificial metabolic advantage that gives them tremendous evolutionary potential.

Hand Flappers

Some flying posthumans re-approached sentience in an entirely different way. Without the augmented metabolisms or the gravitational advantages of their siblings on distant planets, they had no choice but to give up their power of flight in order to develop further.

The Hand Flappers were one such species. Their wings, once used for butterfly-like flutters in the unearthly gardens of Qu, had shrunken and reverted back into their manual condition. Their legs were likewise re-adapted, but they bore a splayed awkwardness from their perching ancestry.

Only a singular, and an almost sadistically simple flaw held them back from developing civilization. In the course of their secondary atrophy, the wings of the Hand Flappers had become useless as hands as well. Their flag like appendages were very useful in signaling and mating dances, but they couldn’t hurl missiles, construct shelter or even manufacture basic stone tools. All that they could do with their useless hands was to display each others’ sexual availability, so the Hand Flappers did just that; flashing and dancing their way to oblivion.

A Hand Flapper on the edge of his mating territory. During their almost comical exaggeration of sexual display, his kind has begun to lose their edge at adaptation. Theirs will be a boisterous, ecstatic but ultimately ephemeral existence.

Blind Folk

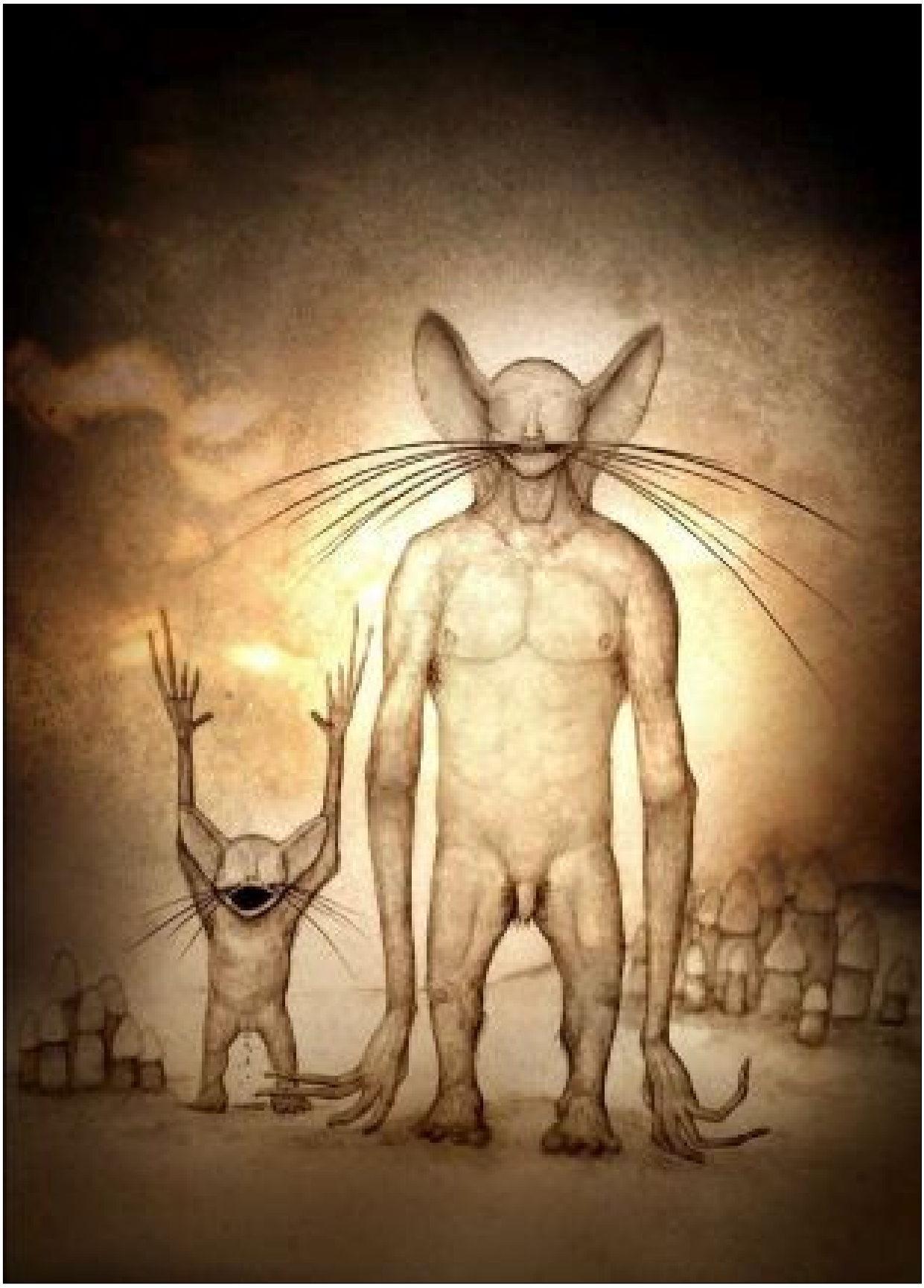
When the Qu came they dug in, and dug in deep. Inside several continent-sized shelters under their besieged world, they waited for the invaders to pass them by. It was a futile gamble. The Qu located the shelter-caves and remade their inhabitants without effort.

The shelters became home to an entirely different ecology, a realm of perpetual darkness, fueled by the trickle of water and nutrients from the world outside. A surprisingly complex ecology developed on this scant resource; gigantic pale insects; the descendants of common household pests, competed with Dali-esque birds and rodents over fields of overgrown fungi. Predators were not uncommon; almost crocodilian fish patrolled the underground streams and vast blind bats, echolocating with unnerving precision, took their toll on the residents of the cave floor. The kilometer-high ceilings of the shelters glowed in the dark with protean constellations of bioluminescent fungi, and in some cases, animals.

People were present here as well, albeit in unfamiliar forms. They were more often heard than seen, as they tried to find their way in the dark with banshee-like screams. These albino troglodytes lived in a realm where sound and touch, not sight, was the gateway of perception. They had developed long, tactile fingers, enormous whiskers and mobile ears to live in the dark. Where their eyes should have been, there was nothing but a patch of haunting, flawlessly smooth skin. Their perfect adaptation to the world of darkness had erased the most basic feature of human recognition.

As adapted as they were, they were doomed. Before the Blind Folk could develop any kind of intelligence to crawl out of their

geographical graves, the glacial constriction of their World's continental plates snuffed out the shelters one by one.



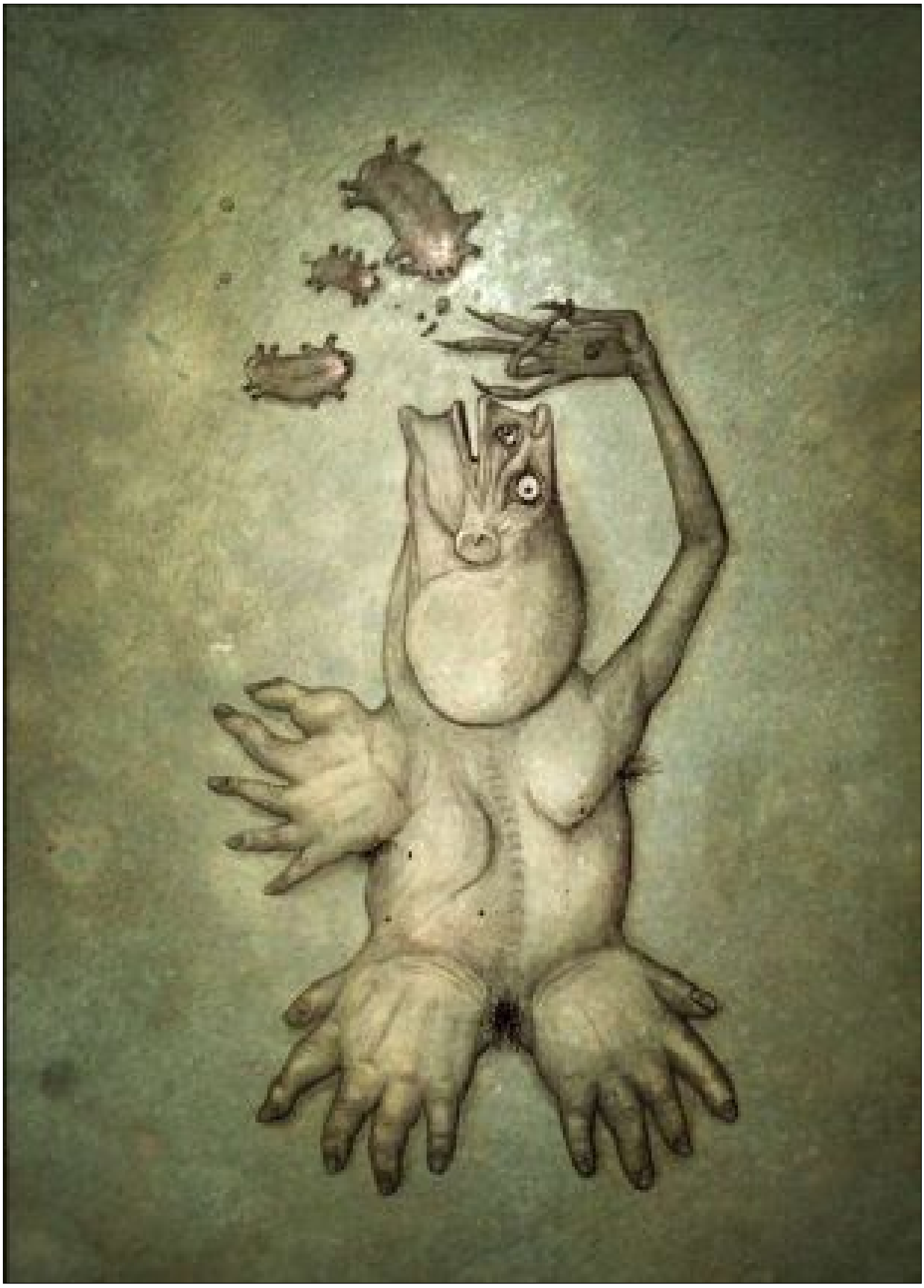
A startled Blind father with his year-old daughter. Although he knows better to sit still in order to confuse sonar-equipped predators, the youngster screams and soils herself in terror. Their attenuated fingers are hallmarks of a lifetime spent in darkness.

Lopsiders

The Qu were grotesquely creative in their redesign of the human worlds. One group of misfortunate souls they transported to a planet with thirty-six times the amount of “normal” gravity, and made them over for life in this bizarrely inhospitable realm.

The results of these experiments resembled nightmare sketchings of Bosch, Dali or Picasso. They looked like cripples squashed between sheets of glass. Three out of their four limbs had become paddle-like organs for crawling; only one of their arms remained as spindly tool of manipulation. This singular, wizened limb also doubled as an extra sensor, like the antennae of an insect.

Their faces were different horrors altogether. All pretensions of symmetry; the hallmark of terrestrial animals from jawless fish onwards, were completely and utterly done away with. One bulging eye stared directly upward while the other scanned ahead, in the direction of the creature’s vertically-opening jaws. The ears were likewise distorted.
Monstrous as they looked, these ex-men thrived in their heavy-gravity environment. Once again there was the usual explosion of species into every available niche, and the Lopsiders consolidated their chances for a renewed sentience.



A Lopsider feeds some indigenous pets native to his high-gravity world. The domestication of native fauna is the Lopsiders' first step on the long way towards civilization.

Striders

While the Lopsiders were redesigned to live under extreme gravity, another species had been adapted for life under the exact opposite conditions; on a Jovian moon with one fifth of Earth's gravity.

It was a world of wonders, where even the grass grew almost ten meters tall and the trees were beyond belief, towering to sizes attained only by the skyscrapers of antiquity. In these surreal forests lived equally spectacular fauna; the descendants of pets, pests and livestock of humans, who in turn had been reduced to animosity as well.

One could see them in the league-tall forests, almost dancing among the trees as they reared higher and higher to browse. Their arms, legs, and necks had been stretched impossibly thin, great flaps of skin blossomed throughout their bodies to dispense waste heat. Sometimes they would even change their color in order to reflect light and keep cool. Overheating was a great problem for their grotesquely tall, thin bodies.

Although imposing, these Giacomettian wraiths were over-developed as to be sickeningly fragile. Even on their gravitationally forgiving world, a fall could shatter their bones, and slipping down from a branch would prove to be fatal. Sometimes, on the open plains, even a strong wind could bring them down like the toppling masts. They survived entirely due to the merciful conditions of their garden world, which were about to change drastically.

About two million years after the Qu left their towering works of human art, a lineage of fearsome predators evolved from the terrestrial poultry that had gone feral on the planet. Resembling

attenuated versions of their dinosaur ancestors, the predators swept through the garden world like wildfires, extinguishing any species too fragile to escape, or resist. The peaceful, delicate striders were among the first to go.

Parasites

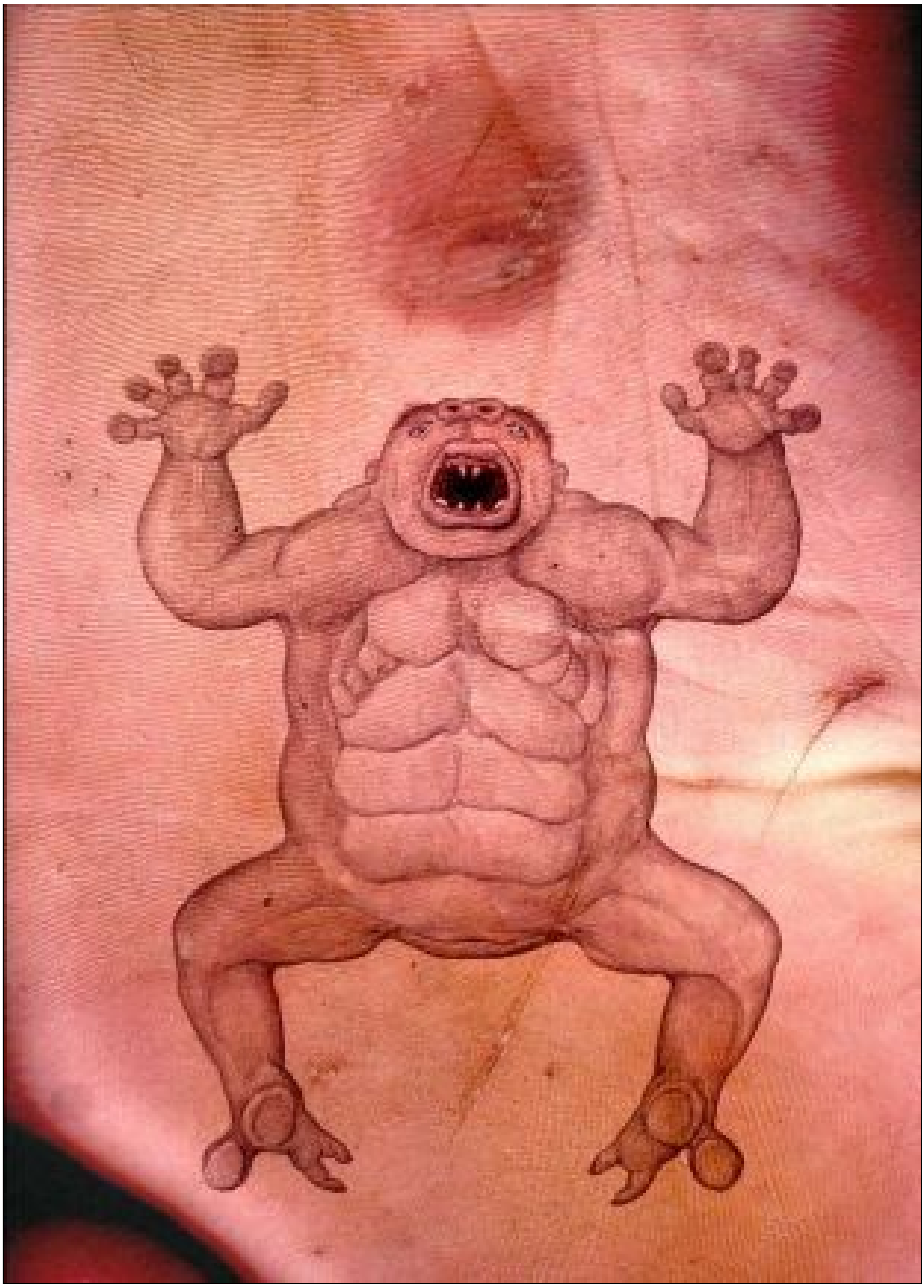
Humanity had diverged into two separate lineages on their world. On one hand there were several races of almost Australopithecine cripples, degraded by the Qu for managing to turn back their initial wave of invasion. Yet simple atavism was too light a punishment for them. Their twisted relatives, the parasites, made up the second part of their sentence.

There were actually several kinds of parasitic ex-people, ranging from tortoise-sized ambulatory vampires to the more common fist-sized variety that lived attached to their hosts. There was even a tiny, endoparasitic kind that infested the wombs of their female victims like ghastly, living abortions.

All of these evolutionary tortures were played out under the careful scrutiny of the Qu for forty million years. The punishment was so baroque, so elaborate that most of the artificial parasitehost relationships died out when the Qu left. Some sub-men learnt to cleanse their tick-like relatives by drowning, burning or even eating them. Others, like the vaginal parasites, died out as their aggressive method of parasitism effectively sterilized their hosts.

Yet one or two varieties did manage to cling on to their hosts with abdominal suckers, muscular, gripping limbs and sterile, pain-soothing saliva. But their success did not lie entirely in the strength of their parasitical advantages. They also learnt to regulate their dumb hosts, not killing them by over-infestation and thus ensuring their own long-term survival as well.

In any case, totally single-sided relations were rare in any ecology, natural or artificial. In millennial cycles, the cousin species' vicious parasitism began to give way into something more beneficial for both sides.



A parasitic person, shown real size. Although their fate seems inhumane in every aspect to an observer of today, their very survival shows that such subjective values are ineffectual in matters of long-term survival.

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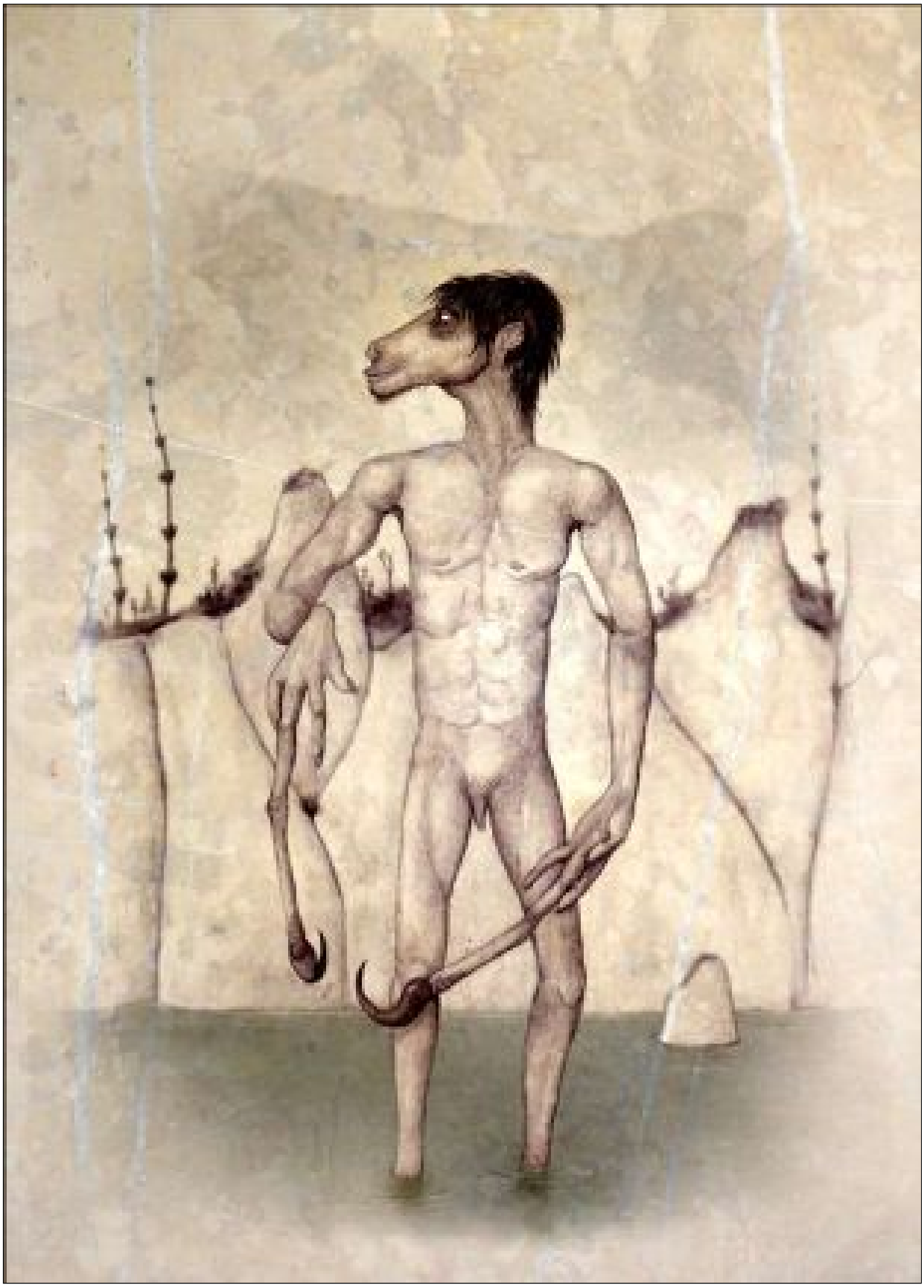
Finger Fishers

Their ancestors were trapped on an archipelago world; a planet sprinkled with many small continents and countless islands over interconnected networks of calm, shallow seas. Like a magnified Aegean, this place was a terrestrial paradise in many respects. Except that after the Qu, no minds were left to enjoy it.

On this vacant biosphere, evolution was quick to begin her blind, unpredictable dance. Once feral, the descendants of degenerate humans adapted themselves to every available niche, no matter how exotic, how outlandish. One group learnt to pluck fish from the lazy shores. Millennia passed and they settled more into their piscatorial lifestyle. Elongated fingers became ambulatory fish-hooks, teeth modified for a generalized diet became needle-like affairs, lined up neatly in a long, thin muzzle. In less than a few million years, the Finger Fishers established themselves as a prominent lineage. There was scarcely a beach, an island or an estuary that was devoid of their pale, lanky forms.

As prolific as they were, the Fishers were still no better than animals. Their “humanity” would come only after another spasm of outlandish adaptations.



Hedonists

Even the blissful existence of the Finger Fishers would have seemed bothersome to the Hedonists; for their kind was not evolved, but designed for a life of pleasure. The Qu had kept them as pampered pets; set loose in a tropical island-world of succulent fruits, bountiful trees and calm, lapping lakes full of sweet, bacterial manna. Furthermore, the Hedonists were left as the only animal life on this place. They had no choice but to enjoy it to the fullest.

In normal conditions, any given species would quickly crowd out such an utopian environment. But normal conditions had never been the point of the Qu redesign. They had altered their subjects so that they could conceive only after mating an enormous number of potential suitors, continually over a period of decades. While this took care of the population problem, it also made the species less adaptable. Without any point in sexual competition, natural selection would progress only at a glacial pace. Fortunately, their stable microcosm remained free of environmental catastrophes even after the Qu left.

All these changes had also made the Hedonists' day. Their lives were juxtaposed routines of browsing, sleeping and mind-blowing sex; troubled neither by the concerns of disease or pregnancy. Aloof and carefree, they enjoyed the most pleasurable times of all mankinds, albeit with the intellectual capabilities of three-year-olds.

It didn't really matter, though. Who needed to think when having such a nice time, after all?

The favorites of the Qu. A female Hedonist lies alone on a beach, contemplating absolutely nothing. Without any pressure from the world, their days make themselves as they go along.

Insectophagi

Nondescript, quaint human species abounded in the post-Qu galaxy. Hundreds of them lived out simple, unnoticed lives, never developing to become sentient, never learning their true heritage as star-born human beings. Most of them went extinct, not to be missed or even remembered. Those that lingered on managed to survive in shady, quiet niches, never again making any impact on the celestial scheme of things.

One such species was the Insectophagi. They had quietly adapted themselves for a diet of colonial insects and small animals; they had faces covered with leathery plates, claw-like hands to dig out prey and worm-like tongues to scoop them up.

All in all, they weren’t special in any particular way. But a combination of galactic invasions, coincidence and pure luck would later make them the longest-enduring of all ur-starmen.

The meek would inherit the cosmos, though not just yet. For now, the Insectophagi were concerned only with the location of insect colonies, and the onset of the mating season.

Spacers

It must be remembered that the Star People did not succumb entirely to the Qu invasions. While their worlds fell away one by one, some Star People took refuge in the void of space. One after another, entire communities scrambled into generation ships and cast themselves off into the darkness, hoping to go unnoticed by the beings that had overrun their galaxy.

Desperate times made for desperate measures. As the Star Men had observed during their initial colonization of the galaxy, life in generation ships inevitably lead to mass insanity and anarchy. This time however, humans had to adapt themselves -or face extinction.

Entire asteroid fields were confiscated and hollowed out to make space-ships of unseen size. These hollow shells cradled bubbles of precious air and water, but no artificial gravity of any kind. It was discovered that a purely ethereal existence would ease the stress of interstellar exhile, provided that its inhabitants were adapted for life inside such an environment.

Furthermore, people were forced to change themselves. In an atmospherically sealed, gravityfree environment, their bones were left free to grow longer, thinner, spindlier. The circulatory and digestive systems were pressurized to avoid heart problems and congestion. The latter change had another advantageous side effect; humans could navigate through the void with jets of air – expelled from modified anuses.

Such experiments were numerous, and usually plagued with failure. Yet they did succeed in creating a future. Sealed tight in their moon sized, air filled, weightless havens, the descendants of the Star People managed to evade the scourge of Qu.

It was an endless diaspora. Even after the Qu left, they would find themselves too divergent to have anything to do with their ancestral

lifestyles. The survivors of the initial hurdle would never set foot on a planet again.

Forty million years from today, Spacers like this individual are the only truly sentient human beings that survive. They are so comfortable in their weightless refuges that the fates of their bestial cousins elsewhere do not concern them. They are also painfully rare; their entire population in the Milky Way Galaxy does not exceed a few dozen arks and a hundred billion souls.

Ruin Haunters

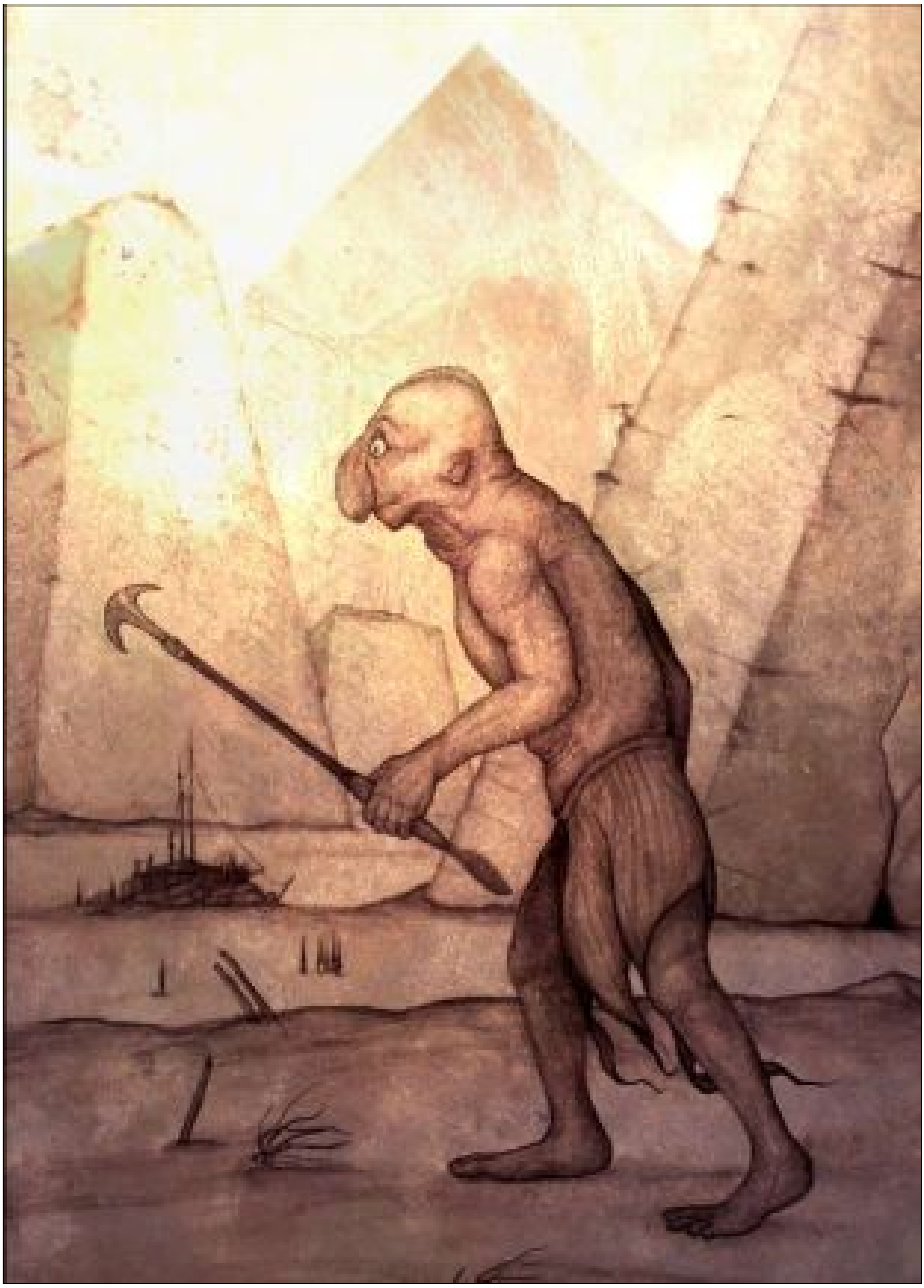
A particular human species, singled out by its lucky access to the heritage of its stellar ancestors, would eventually get to play a leading role in the shape of things to come.

They had gotten through the Qu invasion with relatively little degradation; yes, they had been reduced to the level of apes, but their recovery had been quick. Apparently, the Qu had not worked as hard at suppressing their intelligence. Nor had they made a comparable effort to wipe away the material traces of the Star Men. Even after millions of years, enormous ruins of the global urban spaces littered the continents of their world. Thus did the Ruin Haunters earn their names.

With developed minds and unrestricted access to the wisdom of the ancient cities, the exponential pace of their development was only natural. One by one they deciphered and built upon the secrets of the bygone Star People, until they almost equaled their galactic ancestors in wisdom and skill.

All of this development happened in an unnaturally short period of time, and sometimes the old technologies were not even understood as they were blindly replicated. Needless to say, such a pace of development put premature stresses on the social and political structures of the Ruin Haunters. They barely survived the five consecutive world wars that raked their planet, two of which were thermonuclear exchanges.

They made it through, their baptism with fire had hardened and awakened them. The wars united them politically and pushed their technological capabilities even beyond the level of the Star Men. Co-incidentally, they also developed a dangerous form of autochthonous madness. The Ruin Haunters had come to believe that they were the sole descendants and the true heirs of the Star People. And they were ready and willing to do anything in order to claim their fictitious, bygone Golden Age.



Only a thousand years after the Qu departure, a Ruin Haunter wanders among the shattered remains of a city of the Star People. The dominating form of an even greater Qu pyramid can be seen in the background.

Sentience Reborn

If any sort of periodical arrangement can be brought to the history of mankind, the post-Qu era of emerging human animals can be likened to a series of millennial dark ages. However, like any “dark age” situation, these periods of silence had finite life spans. One by one, like stars emerging from the fog, new civilizations were born out of the shattered remnants of mankind.
In some rare cases, the recovery was swift and straightforward. In most other situations, it came only after a lengthy series of adaptive radiations, extinctions and secondary diversifications.

Within these lines of descent, there was as much distance between the initial post-humans and their intelligent descendants as between the first Cretaceous fuzzballs and Homo sapiens.

Sooner or later, human intelligence returned to the cosmos. But except from their shared ancestry, these new people had nothing in common with “people” of today, or even each other.

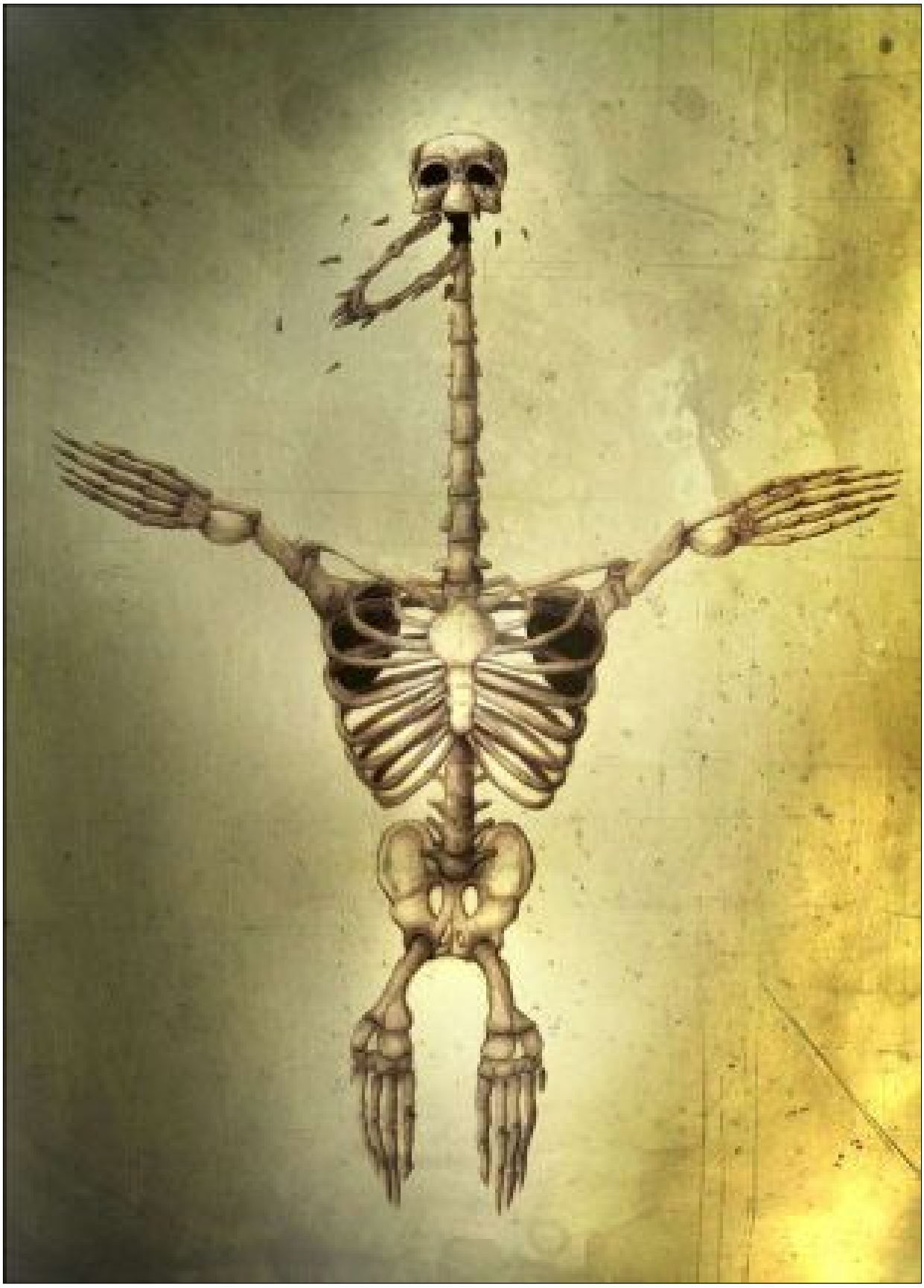
Extinction

Not all human animals made it through. In fact, it must be realized that the majority of post-Qu humans died out during the eras of transition. Extinction, the utter and absolute death of an entire family, entire community, entire species, was rampant in the galaxy.

There was nothing cruel or dramatic in all of this. Extinction was as common, and as natural as speciation. Sometimes a species simply

failed to adapt to competition, or the abrupt change of conditions. In other occasions, their numbers dwindled across imperceptible gulfs of time. This way or the other, human animals faded out.

In all of this death, however, there was new life. As one species vacated a certain niche, others would soon step in to take its place. Adaptive radiations would follow, filling in the blanks with myriads of diverse and varied forms. Despite the fallen, the flow of life would proceed, blazing in constant turnover.



The fossil of an extinct, aquatic human from a forgotten colony world. Unbeknownst to the universe, his kind adapted, flourished and died out soon after the Qu retreat. His tale serves to tell us that all that is alive will inevitably perish, and it is the journey, not the conclusion that matters.

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Snake People (Descendants of the Worms)

The scorching sun eventually cooled down, and life flooded back to the surface from her subterranean stronghold. As animals of all kinds exploded into the terrestrial niches that had been left vacant for millennia, so did the descendants of the worms. On the surface, they found new opportunities as entire assemblages of serpentine grazers, swimmers, predators…

…and people. One form, descended from tree-climbing mammalian snakes, re-evolved the human intelligence that had lain dormant for so long. They observed, contemplated and philosophized with novel, spirally coiled brains and handled the world with a singular pelvic “hand”, borne out from the remnants of their ancestors’ feet.

They looked nothing at all like their distant human ancestors, but their social development followed a similar path; several agricultural world empires, followed by industrial revolutions, social experiments, world wars, civil wars and globalization. But then again, socio-political parallelism in history did not necessarily imply a similar, or even recognizably human world.

Modern cities of the global Snake world were tangles of pipe like “roads”, branching, three dimensional railroads and windowless, hole-like buildings. Though their knotted architecture differed from region to region, these settlements generally looked like kilometer-wide balls of glass, metal, plastic and cloth, wrapped so tightly that a human of today would find it impossible to move inside them. Plazas and open areas were totally absent, as they presented navigational obstacles and areas of insecurity. Their evolutionary background in the trees had made the Snake People into borderline agoraphobes.

None of these, of course, was unusual to the Snakes in any way. Their relatively “alien” lifestyle was as particular to them as ours is to

us. All across their world, the arterial cities throbbed with people, each with their own joys, sorrows and chores, living out lives as human as any other intelligent beings'.

A Snake person at home, enjoying a book while smoking and “listening” to vibrational ground-music. Through the open door can be seen the chaotic tangle of the city.

Killer Folk (Descendants of the Human Predators)

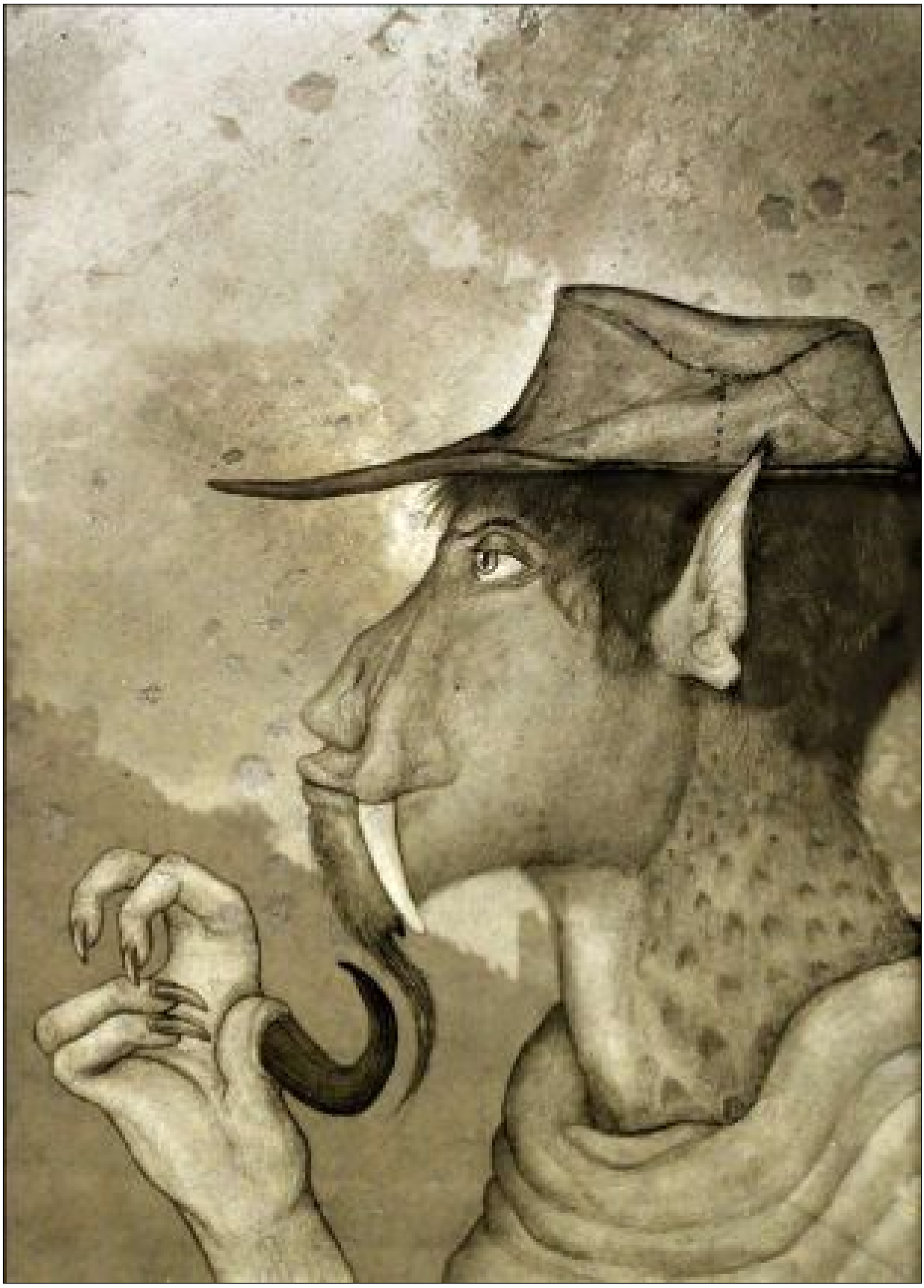
The carnivores also rebounded into civilization. Their journey involved a series of changes during which they lost the adaptations that had allowed them to endure as the top predators of their world. The saber teeth, once used for slashing through sinew and trachea, became fragile and thin, useful only as organs of social display. The hook-like thumb claws were also reduced, but not deleted. In their place, the last two digits rotated perpendicularly to become newfangled graspers. All this gracility, however, did not mean weakness. Although they were no longer specialized for hunting, the Killer Folk could still kill with their bare hands, but only if they really wanted to. What enormous claws and teeth could not do, they could easily achieve with bow, arrow, flintlock repeater or gas rifle.

Their descent from predators gave the Killer Folk a unique social profile. Almost all of their religions had rituals allowing for periods of completely natural, animalistic hunts and duels. This necessity of venting these atavistic urges also led to the formation of religious “hunter nobilities”; privileged warriors who were skilled in the arts of hunting, war and murder. Entire societies were assembled underneath these ruling classes; orderly communities that erupted once every year into an orgy of death, sex, and prayer. For thousands of years nomadic warriors, together with their vast herds of once-human livestock, chased and battled each other across a chessboard of continents.

All of this chaos was to be swept apart with the advent of modernity. In a development comparable to an industrial revolution, one nation-pack of Killers devised methods of settled, intensive factory farming.

Organized state structure, secularism and technological leap-frogging were quick to follow.

Needless to say, such developments polarized the world into bands of progressive, developed “factory herders” and increasingly fanatical “hunting states.” While one side condemned their old, animal ways, the other side embraced them with blind zealotry. This was their crisis of modernity; the balkanization of the progressive and conservative factions on the road to global unity. Fortunately, the Killers managed to pull themselves through, even after drifting dangerously close to global conflict at certain points.



A young male Killer tours one of the myriad ruined fortresses in his country, testimony of their species' bloody, protean history. The planet of the Killer Folk is an archaeologists' paradise. It has more buried dark ages, ruined cultures and fallen kingdoms than any other world.

Tool Breeders (Descendants of the Swimmers)

They used to be simple creatures, descendants of a battered people that had taken to the sea. Their remote *sapiens* ancestors would have given such beings no chance of a sentient comeback, for they thought that technological advances were impossible in the fluid medium of the oceans. But the Swimmers disproved such predictions by founding one of the most advanced and most outrageously alien cultures of the entire human lineage.

Fire, the cornerstone of industrial engineering, was almost impossible to sustain and use underwater. But the Breeders simply choose another path when complex toolmaking proved impracticable. They began to breed their tools and machines for them.

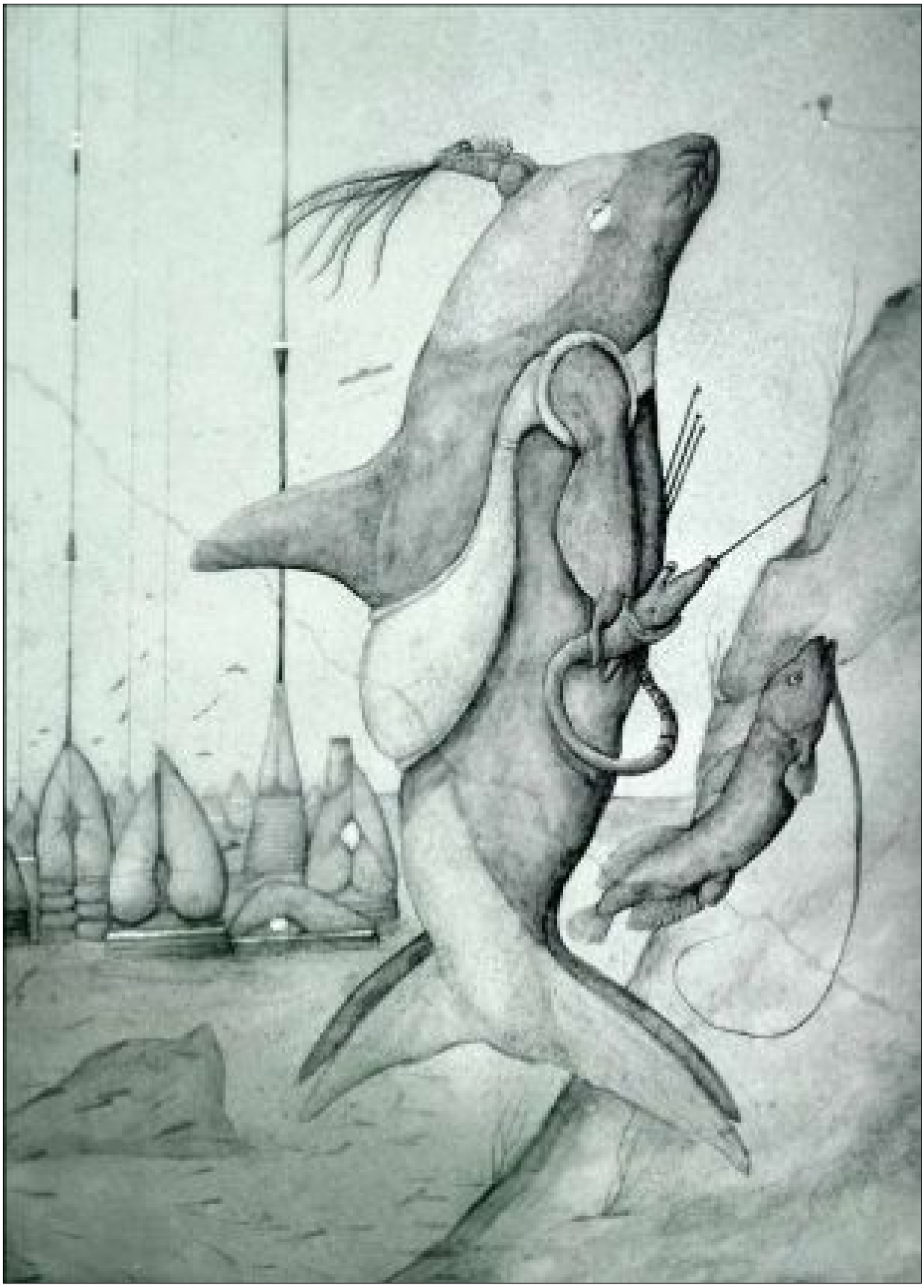
It had started long before the species was even intelligent. In the endless variety of life in the seas, the Swimmers always adopted and controlled the organisms that were useful in some way. Once domesticated, these creatures were willingly or unintentionally modified through artificial selection and conditioning. The process was slow, but once underway, its effects were formidable.

A modern city of the Breeders was a sight to behold. Huge, heart-like creatures pumped out nutritious fluids to a network of self-repairing, living conduits. This was their equivalent of a power grid, and it reached every single one of the Breeders' huge, exoskeletal dwellings; "powering" bioluminescent lights, flickering cephalopod skin-televisions, medicinal sea-squirts and countless other devices

that had been bred from living creatures. The advances in biology had risen exponentially, until genetic engineering was completely mastered. Modern Breeders did not even need to use animals; a simple manipulation of cultured tissues and stem-cells could give solutions to any problem at hand.

The mastery of genetics had conquered many obstacles. The yawning ocean depths, as well as the Planet's few tiny landmasses were now firmly within the Breeders' grasp. However, they were not contempt with mere planetary dreams. New forms and bizarre creatures were still being developed, in daring attempts to conquer the one realm that was most hostile to life.

Sealed in their living ships, the Breeders wished to return to the stars.



A Breeder huntress on a garden reef. Living tools are an indispensable part of these beings' daily lives; she manages to breathe underwater through an oxygen-filtering crustacean fitted over her blowhole. She holds a mollusk-derived rifle that shoots out specially-modified fish teeth, and her companion is a brain-augmented fish that has been hardwired to return kills. Buildings made from calcified shells glitter in the background, ablaze with bioluminescence.

Saurosapients (Livestock of the Lizard Herders)

One of humanity's eventual inheritors was not even human. They came from the reptilian stock that had proliferated during the demise of the Lizard Herders.

Theirs was a true case of a world turned upside down. As the humans degenerated into witless animals, the cold-blooded reptiles prospered in the tropical climate of their planet. Millennia passed and they began to produce increasingly smarter forms, one of which, distantly resembling featherless versions of the predatory dinosaurs of the past, actually crossed over the threshold of sentience and built up a series civilizations.

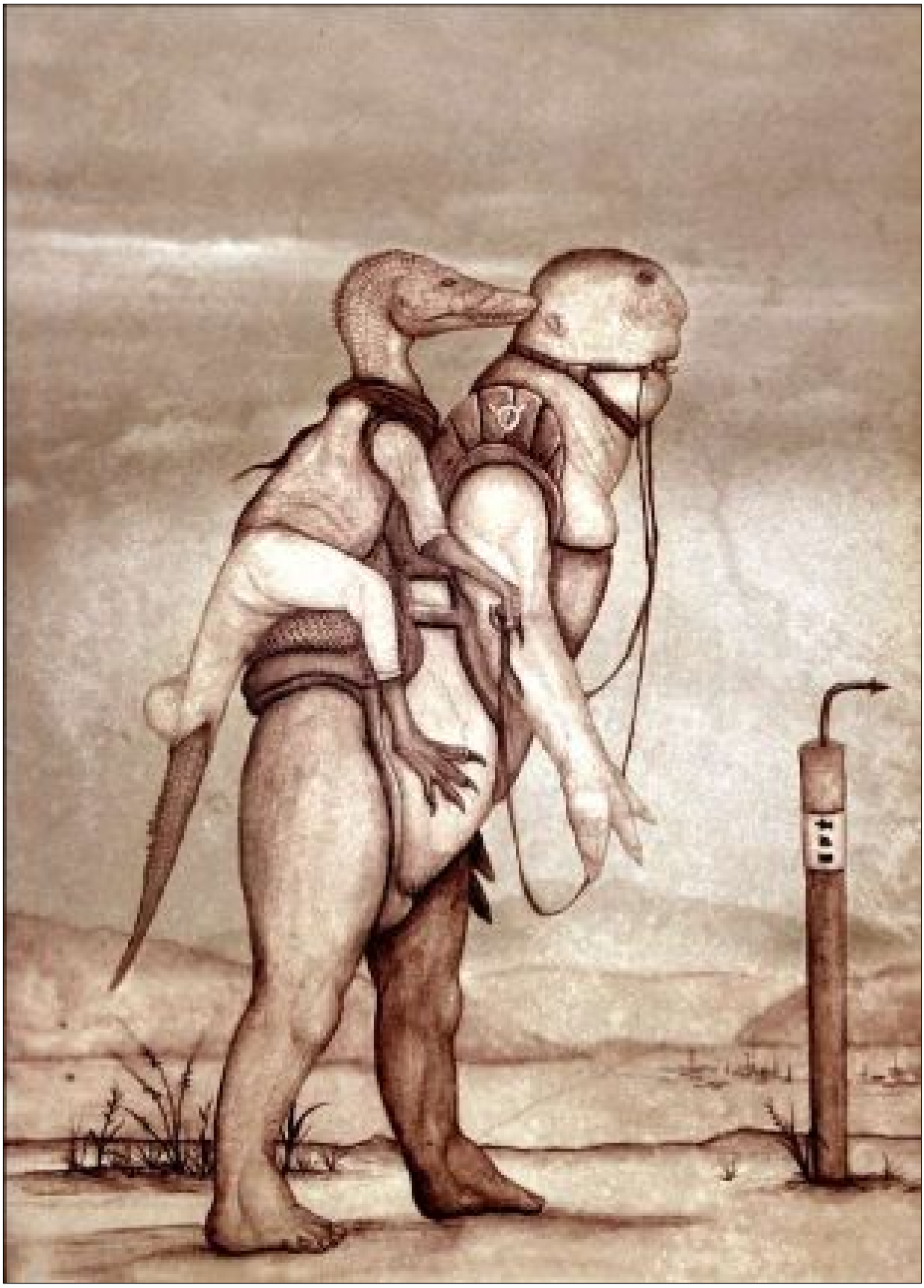
These fledgling cultures were quick to understand the true origin of the monstrous ruins littering their planet, ruins that until then had been considered natural aberrations or timeless memorabilia of gods. Now, however, they saw the intermingled ruins of the Qu and the Star People for what they really were. It was through this understanding that the biologically unrelated Sauros' took up the cultural identity of humanity.

In their archaeological efforts, the Sauros began to understand that the animals they used for food and labor were descended from the founders of their very existence. And somewhere in the stars lurked

the forces that malformed them, forces greater than the Star People, dark forces that might someday return. The human animals served as a remainder, just as Panderavis had, that if the Saurosapients wanted to assure their continued existence in the cosmos, they had to be watchful.

The pressure of such a reality put their cultures under enormous stress. Some factions turned to made-up religions and remained ignorant under an umbrella of comforting fantasies. Others acknowledged the threats of the galaxy, but reverted to a paranoid rhetoric of conservationism. The galaxy had scared them greatly. Finally, there were those who saw the galactic redoubt and acted to face the odds, however great they might be. Conflicts and even wars were not uncommon between these three factions.

In the end, the centuries-long dispute began to resolve in the progressive factions' favor. As they expanded their spheres of knowledge, influence and activity, the Saurosapients became as "human" as any other civilization opening up to the galaxy.



Modular People (Descendants of the Colonials)

The blind workings of evolution followed the unlikeliest paths, made use of the most fleeting opportunities. The very existence of the Modular People was testimony to this fact. Their ancestors, the Colonials, would've been seen as hopeless cripples by almost any observer; they lacked coherent organs and their existence was limited to carpeting water shores like mats of algae. But as degenerate as they were, the Colonials were resilient survivors, able to hold on to life in the harshest of conditions.

As time passed, they began to organize themselves in differentiated colonies instead of homogenous mats. In the colonies, each human "cell" could perform a singular function and benefit from the union of others. Thus began the great age of organization, during which different colonies competed with each other by developing specialized human-cells that would give them an edge in the struggle for life. Some colonies grew enormous tap-roots that were able to siphon resources from far away. Others abandoned roots altogether and began to move themselves on starfish-like foot segments. Some colonies came up with units equipped with claws and poisons, taking competition to a brand-new, deadly level. Others responded to the threat with armor-plating, or watcher-cells equipped with enormous eyes.

The eventual winner of this Colonial arms race was a sentient colony; organized around hyperspecialized units whose entire purpose was to direct the others. These colonies spread around the planet as they adapted the parts of their rivals to function within themselves. Thus were the Modular People born.

Living in fully-industrialized megalopoli, they came in an indescribable variation of shapes and sizes. Anything from castle-like guardian forests to diminutive, scuttling couriers was a member of the

Modular whole. They could combine with each other and split up, or exchange parts as needs presented themselves. The only thing constant in all of their protean existence was their mental and cultural unity.

Due to their biological structure, these people had managed the impossible. They were actually living in a world of peace and utopian equality, where everybody was happy to be parts of greater, united wholes.

A modular colony treats a specialized digester unit with sprays of anti-ulcer medication produced by the medical drone held in its “hands”. Note the differing segments, each of them mutated human beings in themselves.

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Pterosapiens (Descendants of the Flyers)

The flyers' supercharged hearts had given them an evolutionary winning hand, and they diversified to fill up the heavens. It was only a time before the competition in the skies got too intense, even for their souped-up metabolisms.

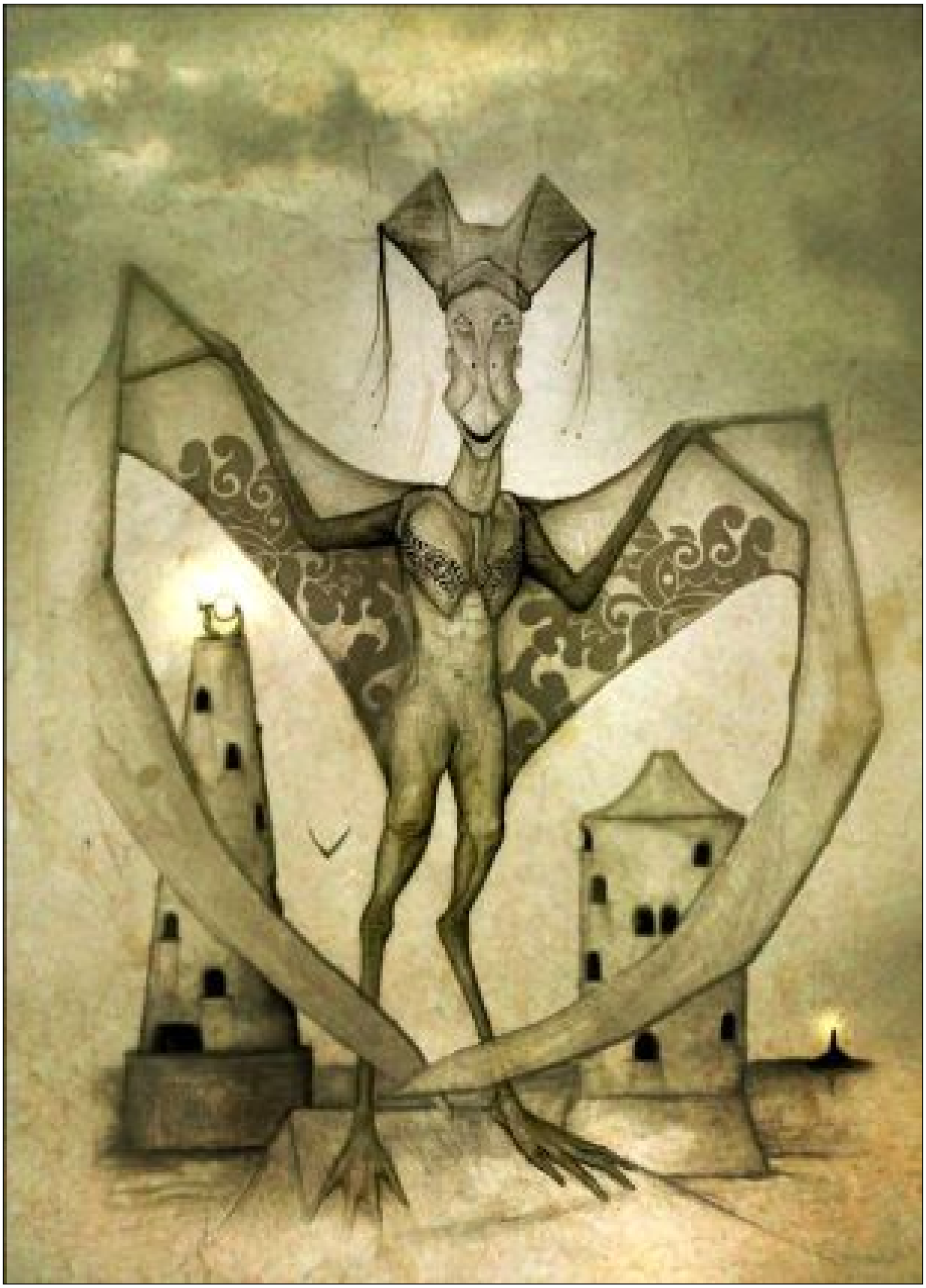
Some lineages gave up their wings and returned to the ground, living as differing sorts of predators, herbivores and even swimmers. Their aerial adaptations gave them an edge on the ground and they produced forms of stupendous size and agility. There were wonderful beings, but no sentience came out of the terrestrial sky-beasts. Instead, civilization flowered in the skies. One species, from a line of wading, stork-like predators, evolved a brain that was large enough to imagine and act upon the world. Their feet, already versatile to catch slippery, swamp-dwelling prey, got even more articulate and assumed the role of hands. As a compensation they lost some of their aerial streamlining, but what they could not do with their bodies, they were more than able to make up with their minds.

Their power of flight made the Pterosapiens a global folk, before they could invent nations and borders. With such an inherent ease of travel, ideas and individuals diffused too fast for social differences to ossify. Acting with a planetary awareness, they farmed their gigantic, terrestrial relatives, raised cities of perches and fluting towers, harnessed the atom and began to gaze up to the stars, without having to compensate (too much) from the average individual's welfare, and without dividing up into quarrelsome factions.

As egalitarian as their life seemed, they paid a stunting, inevitable price. Their hearts, even in their boosted state, had trouble supporting their power of flight and grotesquely large brains at the same time. As a consequence, they had an ephemeral lifespan. A Pterosapien was sexually mature at two, middle-aged by sixteen and usually dead by

twenty-three years of our time. This grim cycle caused them to appreciate every moment of their existence dearly, and they pondered upon it with feverish intensity. A shelf of scrolls by Pterosapien philosophers would’ve been the envy of every human library. In their cities, life blazed away with unreal speed, rushing past to meet fleeting deadlines.

As a species, the angelic flyers were victims of heart disease.



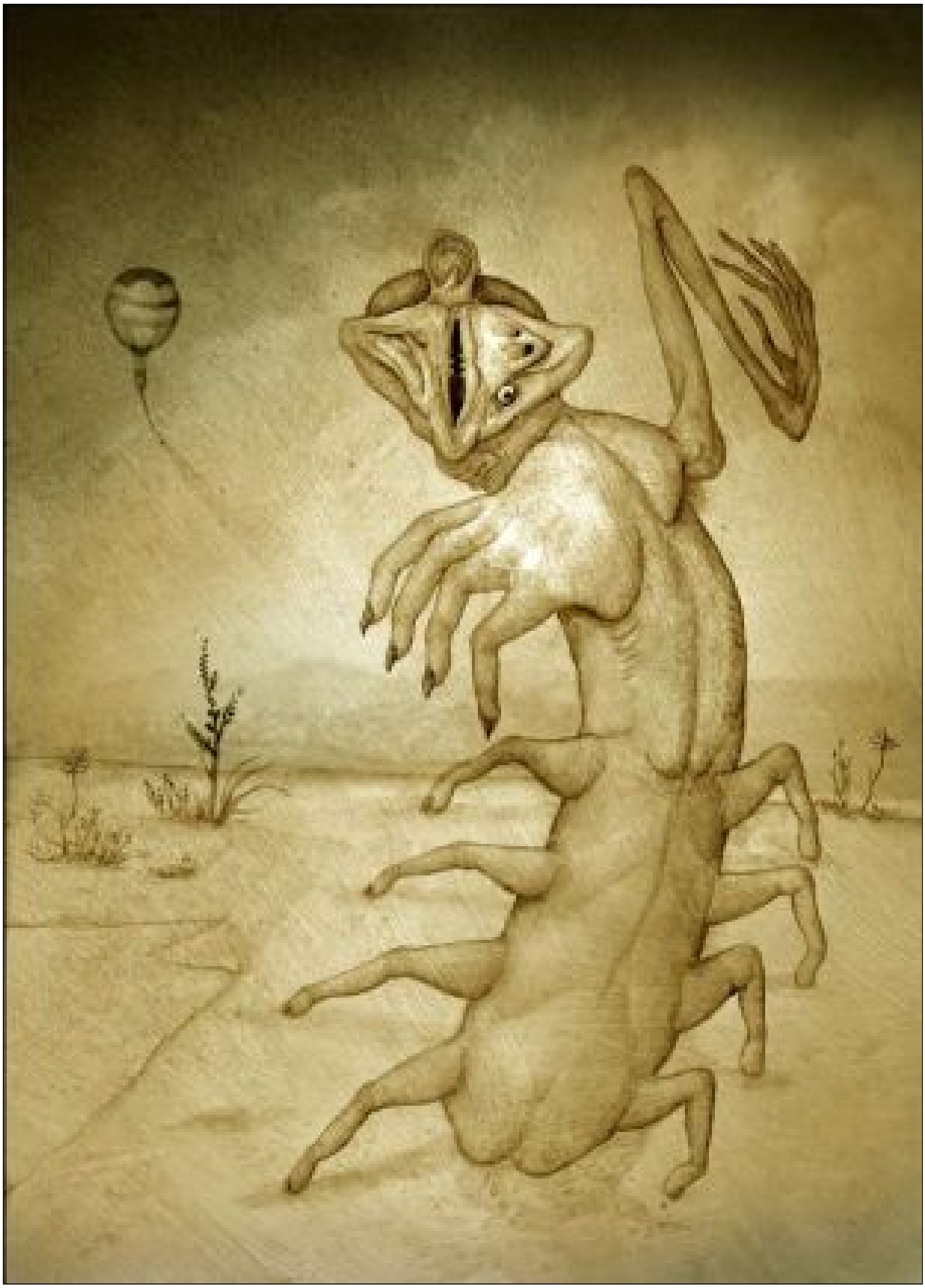
A Pterosapien poses by the bizarre buildings of a seaside resort. At ten days long, this will be the only holiday in her ephemeral life.

Asymmetric People (Descendants of the Lopsiders)

Although contorted by gravity, the Lopsiders managed to regain their sentience, and develop a civilization in a short few million years. Squat, pancake-like buildings spread all over their planet. These constructs looked like squashed bunkers, and they were never more than a few meters high. They did not seem like much, but such structures were entrances to underground homes, schools, hospitals, temples, universities but also embassies, prisons, asylums, command centers and arsenals. They lived strange lives, but the Lopsiders were human in all of their virtues and evils. Thus, it was only natural for them to expand outwards and look for new frontiers to colonize. Fortunately, their solar system harbored other planets, similar to the Lopsider homeworld in almost all respects, all respects except gravity. But they weren't willing to let such trivial details stop them.

Throughout their history, humans had always risked changing themselves to preserve their future. It was a risky gamble, but it had paid off since the days of the Martian-Americans. But reengineering the flattened Lopsider body for a benign gravity was a monumental task indeed. Suffice it say that the experiments took millennia to achieve even limited success. After countless attempts, the Asymmetric People were born, or rather made. Their bodies were changed considerably; what had been shovel-like toes to slither through the high-gravity dirt had become centipedal legs, and the singular, grasping hand was elongated to an extreme degree. Their grotesque faces had been inverted and turned upside-down after reverting from a flounder-like existence. Twisted as they were, members of this new race enjoyed tremendous advantages over their flattened forefathers.

Their social development also parallelled that of the bygone Martian-Americans. Once again there was a golden age, followed by increasing tensions and interplanetary war. But unlike the Martians, the Asymmetrics ruthlessly exterminated their parent race and went on to rule the solar system alone. On the way, they stumbled across the remains of the Qu and the Star People and advanced immensely. Triumphant on their own realm, they turned to the heavens for further exploits.



An Asymmetric nobleman poses nude to reveal his bizarre anatomy. Normally, these creatures dress up in elaborate garments that resemble heaps of interconnected, enlarged stockings.

Symbiotes (Descendants of the Parasites)

As time passed, the relationships between the parasites and their hosts got connected to such a degree that it began to involve a co-operation of the individuals. These were no longer single-sided relationships; in exchange for the hosts' nutritious blood, the parasites offered their heightened senses as early warning against predators and other hazards.

A great "arms race" of symbiotic relationships thus commenced. Certain 'parasites' offered their hosts larger eyes, others sharper senses of smell, hearing or even additional defensive weapons in the shape of venomous saliva, malodorant sprays or an extra bite. The hosts returned the favor with longer running legs, stronger bodies, and specialized, ergonomic nesting sites rich in blood vessels and covered in insulating fur. Different complexes of parasite and host species evolved, compatible only amongst themselves.

The development of such creatures was in a way reminiscent of the great Modular colonies, thriving on their own world light-years away. But unlike the Modulars, the components of the Symbiotes belonged to different species, instead of modified variations of the same basic organism. In eventuality, both relationships led to the same point: Sentience.

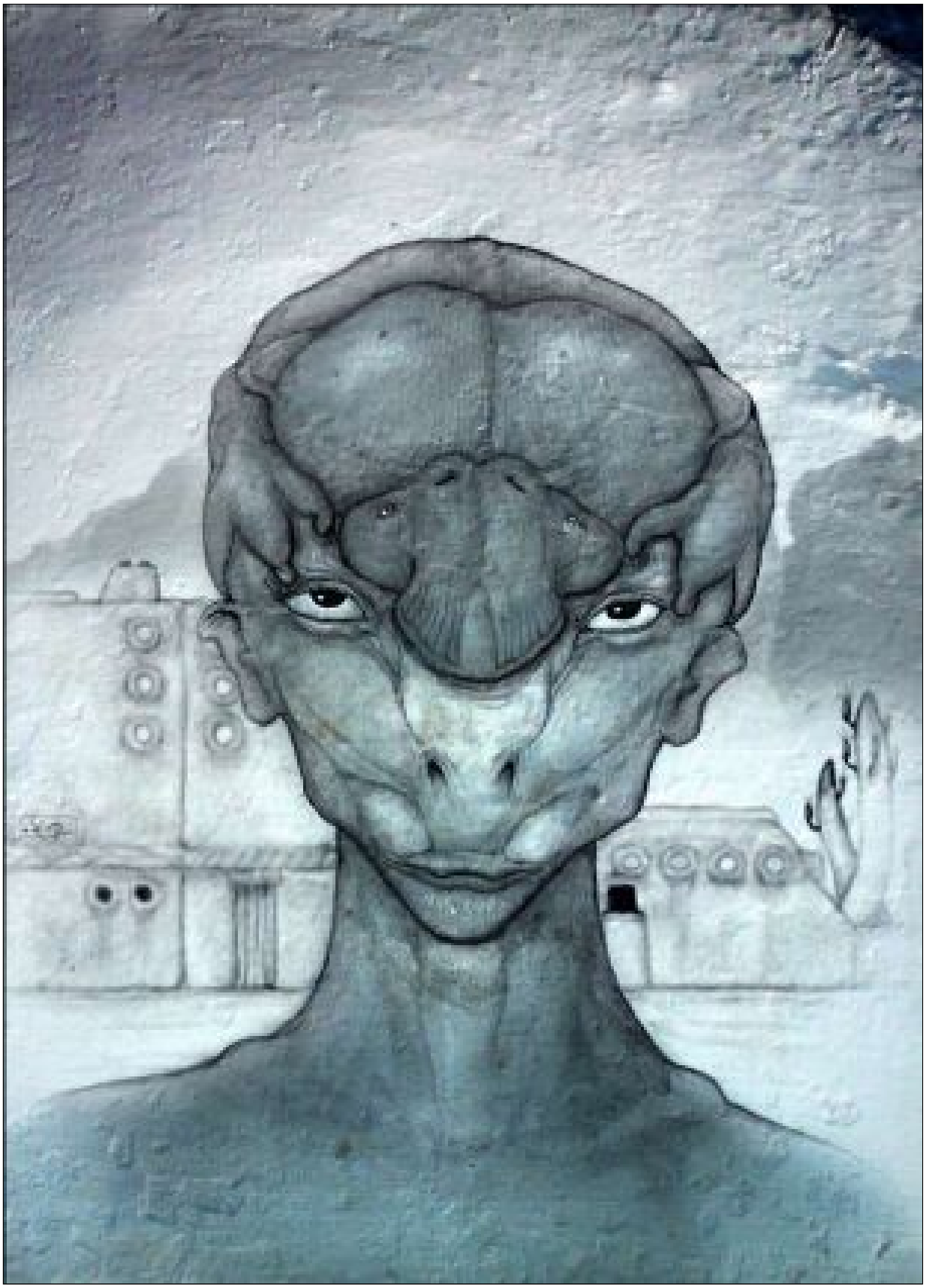
In the secluded forests of a certain continent, a new parasitic species developed. They did not have the ballistic poison sprays, infectious stings or the grossly hypertrophied arm-claws of their relatives. Instead, these parasites offered a simpler bargain; an ability to think in return of total submission. Initially this relationship was more like a

horse and its rider, but after a few hundred thousand years the Symbiotes could manipulate their hosts like puppets through a combination of tactile and olfactory signals.

A few more millennia and these combined beings developed an order not unlike our own, complete with countries, politics and even war, albeit reduced in the newly globalizing world-culture. In this age technology filled most functions of the hosts, but a thriving husbandry of these creatures still remained due to tradition and simple efficiency. An average Symbiote would begin the day on his business host, and move onto a more comfortable domestic one when he returned home after work.

And perhaps, on the olfactory television, he would smell news of the excavations of the million-year-old Qu ruins, of the marvelous discoveries salvaged from the Star Men wrecks, or of the enormous radio arrays that rose everywhere to listen to the stars.

It was a pattern that was being repeated all over.



A Symbiote poses on one of his several hosts. In the background can be seen some of their rural housing, with man-sized doors for the mindless hosts, and the smaller holes for their intelligent patrons.

Sail People (Descendants of the Finger Fishers)

The Finger Fishers were already among the most divergent of the post-human races. With harpoon-like digits and almost crocodilian muzzles, they looked nothing like their parental stock. But even this form would look conservative to their sentient descendants. With many small, scattered islands, isolated sub-continents and differentiated niches, their homeworld was an evolutionary cauldron where isolated members of certain species could, under the right circumstances, evolve into wildly different forms. This condition was similar to the island-realms of Madagascar, Galapagos, or Hawaii on old Earth, except that this time, it was on a global scale.

Some descendants of the Fishers, trapped on lonely islands, grew smaller and developed their fishing claws into graceful wings. Others took directly to the sea and became the analogues of whales, dolphins and mosasaurs. Within this evolutionary bubbling, one particular lineage gave rise to the ancestral Sail People.

They too elongated their fingers into wings, but these were not used for flight. Instead, they became sails that drove them effortlessly across the oceans. With fingers turned into sails, they used their mouths and extended tongues to catch their pelagic prey. These organs eventually assumed the role of the Fishers' long atrophied, dexterous hands. The need to better navigate the endless seas put an inevitable pressure on their memories, and the Sailors' brains grew correspondingly. It was only a matter of time until one of these navigators became smart enough to think.

Even when sentient, the Sail People still needed a long time to achieve any sort of social stability. Their scattered world made for a tremendous diversity of cultures, which competed and fought just as resiliently. Across generations, untold flotillas of tribal warriors battled each other in epoch-spanning, pointless conflicts. Nomadic warriors and pirate societies inevitably came into being, prolonging the uncontrollable cycle of violence.

Only when a certain warrior tribe developed warfare on an industrial scale, and the state society needed to support it, and then, only when this notion of modernity gave rise to an idea of peace did the Sail People finally manage to unify. Generations of blood had stained the oceans for far too long.

A Sailor goes hunting with his harpoon-wielding companion in the background. Extremely violent by nature, these people frequently resort to savage hunting campaigns to quell their bloodlust in modern life. Notice their tongue-derived ‘hands,’ and the accompanying flying creature, actually one of the Sail Peoples’ distant cousins.

Satyriacs (Descendants of the Hedonists)

Their pleasure-drenched existence, locked between their static paradise world and their inherently slow pace of evolution, seemed immune to change. Perhaps this was true for a million years or so. But on larger scales, complete stasis was a fable.

During a particular era, geologic upheavals threw up huge masses of land over the shallow oceans of their world. The Hedonists, until then trapped on a singular island no bigger than today's Iceland, were not late to colonize these new pastures. This was more of a necessary exodus, since the events that raised the new lands had also thrown up enormous clouds of ash that smothered the atmosphere and blocked out the sun. Their innocence finally spoilt, most of the Hedonists died out, unable to adapt. The only survivors were fast-breeding freaks who had abandoned the reproductive quirks of their ancestors. It was these forms that colonized the newborn continent and gave rise to a multitude of species which included the Satyriacs, sentient heirs to the Hedonists.

These beings resembled their ancestors to a great degree, except that they now sported enormous "tails"; boneless organs of balance woven out of extended pelvic muscles and fat. Along this appendage, their entire bodies were re-oriented in horizontal, almost dinosaurian postures. Although they had abandoned the frantic reproductive strategies of their ancestors, their social lives still retained a delightful tint of casual promiscuity.

The Satyriac civilization was quick to establish itself globally, for even with the additional landmasses, the terrestrial domain of their world remained no larger than Australia. For a while three and then two land empires competed each other, before dissolving into a myriad smaller nations and finally re-unifying into a coherent world order. From this point on, the Satyriac world once again became a Valhalla of pleasure, with festivals, concerts and ritualized orgies punctuating

every working week. This time, however, it could all be savored by true intelligence.

Satyriac audience goes wild as the performer hits the climax of his song. Such events are an everyday part of the Satyriac life.

Bug Facers (Descendants of the Insectophagi)

Over time, their insectivorous ancestors came to resemble their prey. Hardened, leathery faceplates, once used for defense against stings and bites, ossified and became integrated into the jaw structure. Their hands and feet, with reduced numbers of fingers and toes, developed into pincer-like affairs. Even their metabolism reverted partially into ectothermy in the balmy, lazy climate of their planet.

But it was none of those adaptations that gave them the edge in survival. Simply put, a congenital defect allowed them to regain their sentience. Even after the smothering by the Qu, the genes of the Star People remained dormant in their cells. Through pure coincidence, one lineage of the Insectophagi developed an atavistic throwback, resulting in larger brains. Which just happened to be useful in cracking open insect nests with crude stone tools.

It was easy ride from there on. Although millennia-long in itself, the development from stone ax to spaceship was an eyeblink in geological time. Like many other species, the Bug Facers passed through consecutive cycles as agrarian (in their case hive-farming) empires, colonial endeavors, industrialization, massive world wars and finally, globalized world-states. But there was one thing that set their development apart from all other post-human species.

They faced another alien invasion.

History does not record much about the invaders, except that unlike the Qu, theirs was a singular effort and it was beaten off in an intense cycle of orbital and terrestrial wars. Although vanquished, the invaders did succeed in leaving behind their traces. They introduced their own flora and fauna, which flourished on the Bug Facer home planet long after they departed. More importantly, they imbibed the poor Bug Facers with a pathological inter-species xenophobia, to the point that they were fearful even of their post-human cousins on other stars.

Through an ironic twist of fate, their fears would be more than justified, though not just yet. The Bug Facers still had time.

A Bug Face celebrity, arguably the most beautiful girl on their planet, poses before a coastal village. In the distance can be seen gasbag-like tree creatures, relics left over from the mysterious alien invaders.

Asteromorphs (Descendants of the Spacers)

Initially refugees, the Spacers were quick to master the vastness of interstellar space. Their isolated space arks joined together and multiplied to form a gigantic, interlocked artifact that was large enough to contain entire worlds. But no planets lay inside the Asteromorph capital; only cavernous, gravity-free bubbles where the inhabitants could finally develop to their fullest.

Freed from the constraints of weight, their bodies grew spindly and insectile, with individual digits extending into multitudes of thin, versatile limbs. Other than these, the only developed organs were their derived jet sphincters; which went on to become the principal means of locomotion. But above all were their brains, their bulging, swollen brains.

With no hindrance from gravity, the human brain could grow into unprecedented sizes. Each generation devised experiments that produced offspring with greater cranial capacity, giving rise to beings who went through their everyday lives thinking in concepts and structures scarcely comprehensible to people of today. The physiological limitations of the human mind had been long since debated. Now, it was established that these limits were indeed real, and individuals who could break them would likewise conquer new grounds in philosophy, art and science. Everything changed.

Yet some aspects of humanity, such as the basic desire to expand, remained. To this end the Asteromorphs built great fleets of globular sub-arks and spread their influence across the heavens, into every stellar cluster and every star system. Within less than a thousand

years, the galaxy was straddled by a new and far more alien Empire of Man.

Strangely enough, its dominion included none of the newly emerging post-human species, for its masters had completely lost interest in planets; those stunting, gravity-chained balls of dirt and ice. The newborn arks settled comfortably in the outer rims of star systems, quietly observing the lives of their struggling relatives.

For the first time in history, there were actual Gods in the myriad human skies. They were silent and weren’t even noticed for most of the time, but their watchfulness was ultimately going to pay off.

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Second Galactic Empire

Over time, the sentient post-humans began to reach out to the galaxy. They inevitably stumbled across the ruins of the Star Men, and figured out their interstellar ancestry. These discoveries were followed by a realization; that there might be others like them, unimaginable distances away. Thus, the fledgling civilizations set about to probing the skies.

The contacts, all established by radio communication, were not spread out evenly. The Empire began little more than a few million years after the Qu left, with the first dialogue between the earliest Killer Folk and the Satyriacs. A few thousand years later they were joined by the Tool Breeders, hailing out from the ocean depths through living radio arrays.

The second wave of sentient species joined in during the following ten million years, as the Modular Whole, Pterosapiens and the fledgling Assymetrics contacted their celestial cousins. Finally, in the next twenty million years, newly evolving civilizations such as the Sauros, Snake People, Parasite/Symbiotes and the Sail People successively contacted the burgeoning Galactic Empire. The Bug Facers were aware of the whole process, but due to their xenophobic experience, they only opened up after a staggering forty million years of silence.

This union was an empire of speech, for actual travel between the stars was too difficult to be practical. Like the bygone colonies of the Star Men, the posthumans co-operated through the unrestricted exchange of information and experience. Although covering every aspect of an astonishing variety of cultures, the Empire's efforts focused on two main issues; political unification (though not homogenization) and galactic awareness; constant readiness for possible alien invasions. Everybody had come across the remains of the mysterious Qu. Nobody wanted a repeat of the same scenario.

When the Second Empire ran into the Asteromorphs, (who had silently saturated the galaxy with their own Empire of Man,) they

feared the worst. But luckily for them, the godlike beings were not interested in the Second Empire, nor any of its worlds. The Asteromorphs were given a wide berth and accepted as they were; incomprehensible, omnipotent forces of nature.

This coordinated effort lasted for almost eighty million years, during which its member species attained previously unimaginable levels of culture, welfare and technology. Each species colonized a few dozen worlds of their own; in which nations, cultures and individuals lived to the fullest potentials of their existence.

Needless to say, all of this was possible only through constant communication and a total openness to the Galaxy. Most communities took this for granted and dutifully participated in the galactic dialogues. But there were others, silent, darkened beings who refused to join in. Through them would come the ruin of the Empire.

Gravital (Descendants of the Ruin Haunters)

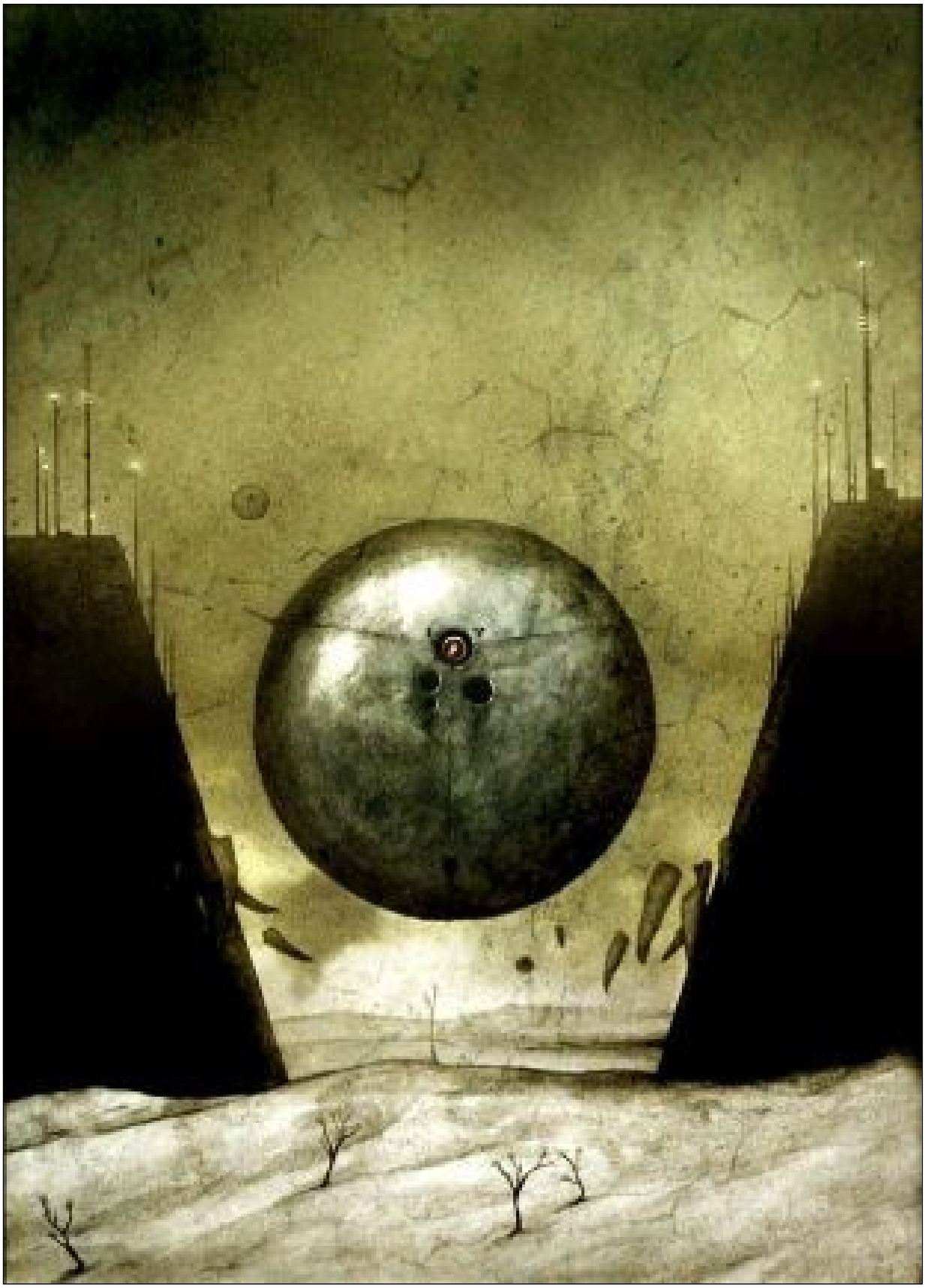
After the lesson of the Qu, Second Galactic Empire kept a constant watch against alien invasion. Ironically, they neglected to look among themselves. The second great invasion of the galaxy came not from outside, but from within.

The Ruin Haunters, who were lucky enough to inherit the secrets of the Star Men and Qu when other species were mere animals, had experienced a tremendous advance in technological prowess. All in all they were as sophisticated as, if not more, than the Asteromorphs of the void. But their ascendancy was not a sane one. Recall that most Ruin Haunters were already deranged with a twisted assumption of being the sole inheritors of the Star Men. They refused to communicate with their relatives on other planets, and kept to their own affairs. This neurotic hubris assumed truly dangerous proportions after the Ruin Haunters modified themselves.

The origin of this modification lay in an earlier catastrophe. The Ruin Haunters' sun was undergoing a rapid phase of expansion, and the species, advanced as it was, could do nothing to stop the process. So the Haunters did the next best thing, and changed their bodies.

The infernal conditions of the solar expansion meant that a biological reconstruction was totally out of the question. Thus, the Haunters replaced their bodies with machines; floating spheres of metal that moved and molded their environment through subtle manipulations of gravity fields. In earlier versions the spheres still cradled the organic brains of the last Haunters. But in successive generations, ways of containing the mind within quantum computers were devised, and the transformation became absolute. The Ruin Haunters were replaced by the completely mechanical Gravital.

While not even organic, the Gravital still retained human dreams, human ambitions and human delusions of grandeur. This, combined with mechanical bodies that allowed them to cross space with ease, made interstellar war a frightening possibility.



Machine Invasion

It took a long time for the Gravital to prepare. Propulsion systems were perfected and new bodies capable of withstanding the interstellar jumps were devised. But when they finally decided that the time was nigh, nothing survived the slaughter.

The invasions followed a brutally simple plan. The target worlds' suns were blockaded and their light was trapped behind specially-constructed, million-mile sails. If the dying worlds managed to resist, an asteroid of two finished them off. Enormous invasion fleets were built, but it was rarely necessary to deploy them. The Machines had caught their cousins completely off-guard.

The great dyings, all of which occurred in a relatively quick, ten-thousand year period, stretched the boundaries of genocide and horror. Almost all of the new human species; unique beings who had endured mass extinctions, navigated evolutionary knife-edges and survived to build worlds of their own, vanished without a trace.

Even the Qu had been loyal to life, they had distorted and subjugated their victims, but in the end they had allowed them to survive. To the machines however, life was a luxury.

Such thorough ruthlessness was not, ironically, borne out of any kind of actual hatred. The Gravital, long accustomed to their mechanical bodies, simply did not acknowledge the life of their organic cousins. When this apathy was mixed with their un-sane claims as the sole heirs of the Star Men, the extinctions were carried out with the banality of say, an engineer tearing down an abandoned building. Under the reign of the Machines, the Galaxy entered a brand-new dark age.

A rare instance of a direct invasion by the Machines, on one of the shore cities of the Killer Folk. Most of the time the inhabitants of the Second Empire were wiped out globally, without the necessity of such confrontations.

When Considering the Invasion

The Machine Invasion brought on the greatest wave of extinctions the galaxy had ever seen; for it was not a simple act of war by one species against another, but a systematized destruction of life itself.

When considering such a vast event, it is easy to get lost in romantic delusions. It is almost as easy to write off the Gravital as ‘evil’ as it is to consider the entire episode as a nihilistic, ‘end of everything’ kind of scenario. Both of these approaches are, as they would be in any historical situation, monumental fallacies.

To begin with, the Gravital were not evil, at least not to their own perception. These beings, although mechanical, still lived their lives as individuals and operated inside coherent societies. They had surrendered their organic heritage but their minds were not the cold, calculating engines of true machines. Even after giving orders that would destroy a billion souls, a Gravital would have a home to go to, and, as incredibly as it might sound, a family and a circle of friends towards which it felt genuine affection. Despite being endowed with compassion, their harsh treatment of the organics was the result of, as mentioned before, a simple inability to understand their right to live.

Furthermore, the Gravital did not constitute a singular, indivisible whole whose entire purpose was to wreck the universe. True, their technological advancement had allowed them to form a pangalactic entity, but within itself the Machine Empire was divided into political factions, and even religious faiths. Superimposed over these fault lines were the daily lives and personal affairs of families and

individuals. Like any sentient being, they had a sense of identity and thus, differing agendas.

Nor did the Machine invasion mean the end of everything. There certainly was a widespread destruction of life, but what was lost was ‘only’ organic life. Consuming energy, directing it for reproduction, thought and even evolution, the machines were as alive as any carbon-based organism. Despite the turnover, Life of a sort survived, and as would be seen, even preserved some of its organic predecessors.

Subjects (Many descendants of the Bug Facers)

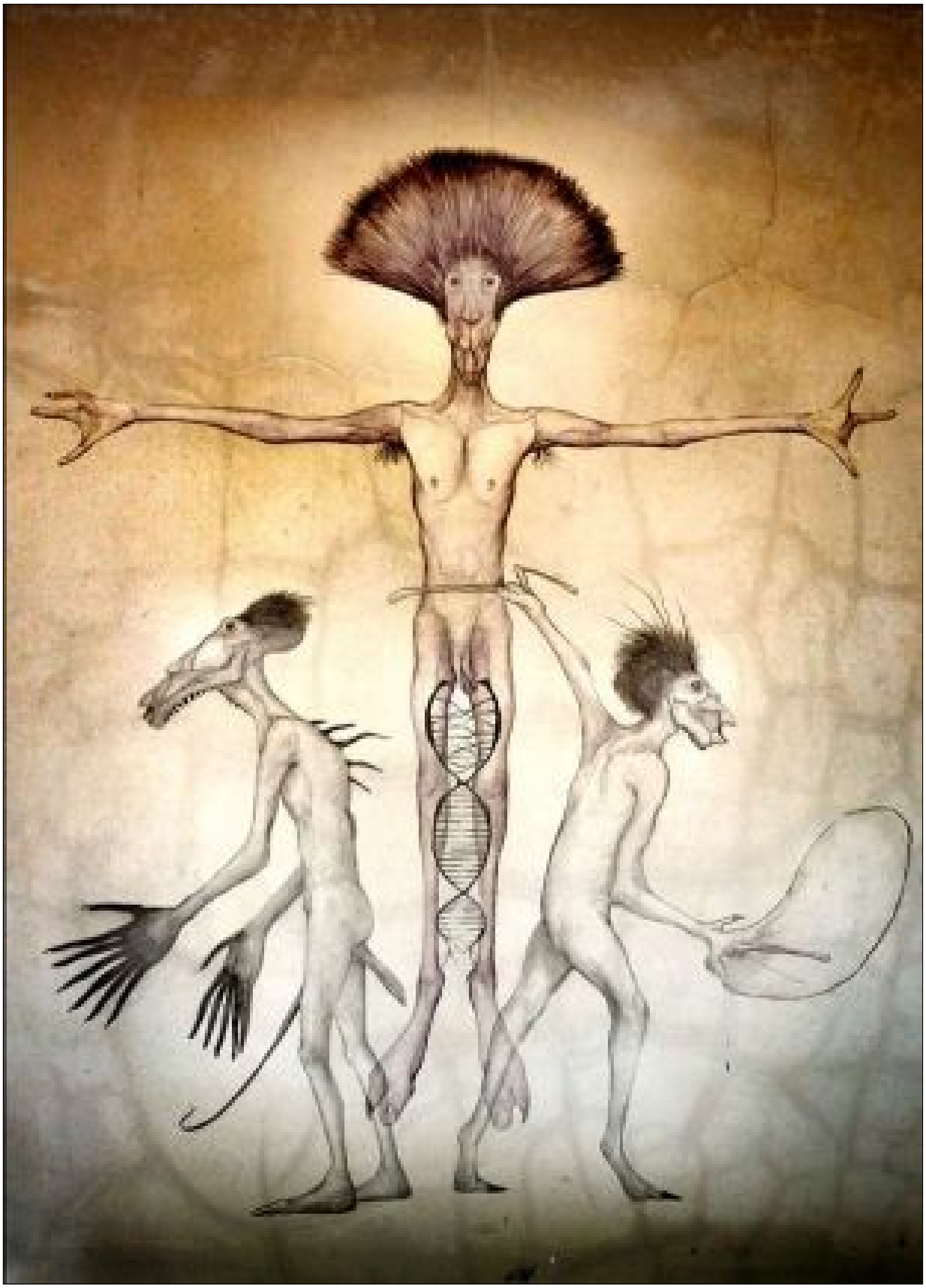
The Bug Facers; racially shy and xenophobic due to their background of repeated alien invasions, became the first species to face the Gravital onslaught. As ironic as their fate seemed, the Bug Facers were the luckiest of the post-humans. Instead of being exterminated like the rest of their cousins, they survived as the only organic beings in the Machine Empire.

The precise reasons for their retention remain unknown to this day. Perhaps the Machines hadn’t perfected their ruthless apathy by then. Or perhaps they pitied the poor organics, and allowed them to maintain a stunted parody of an existence.

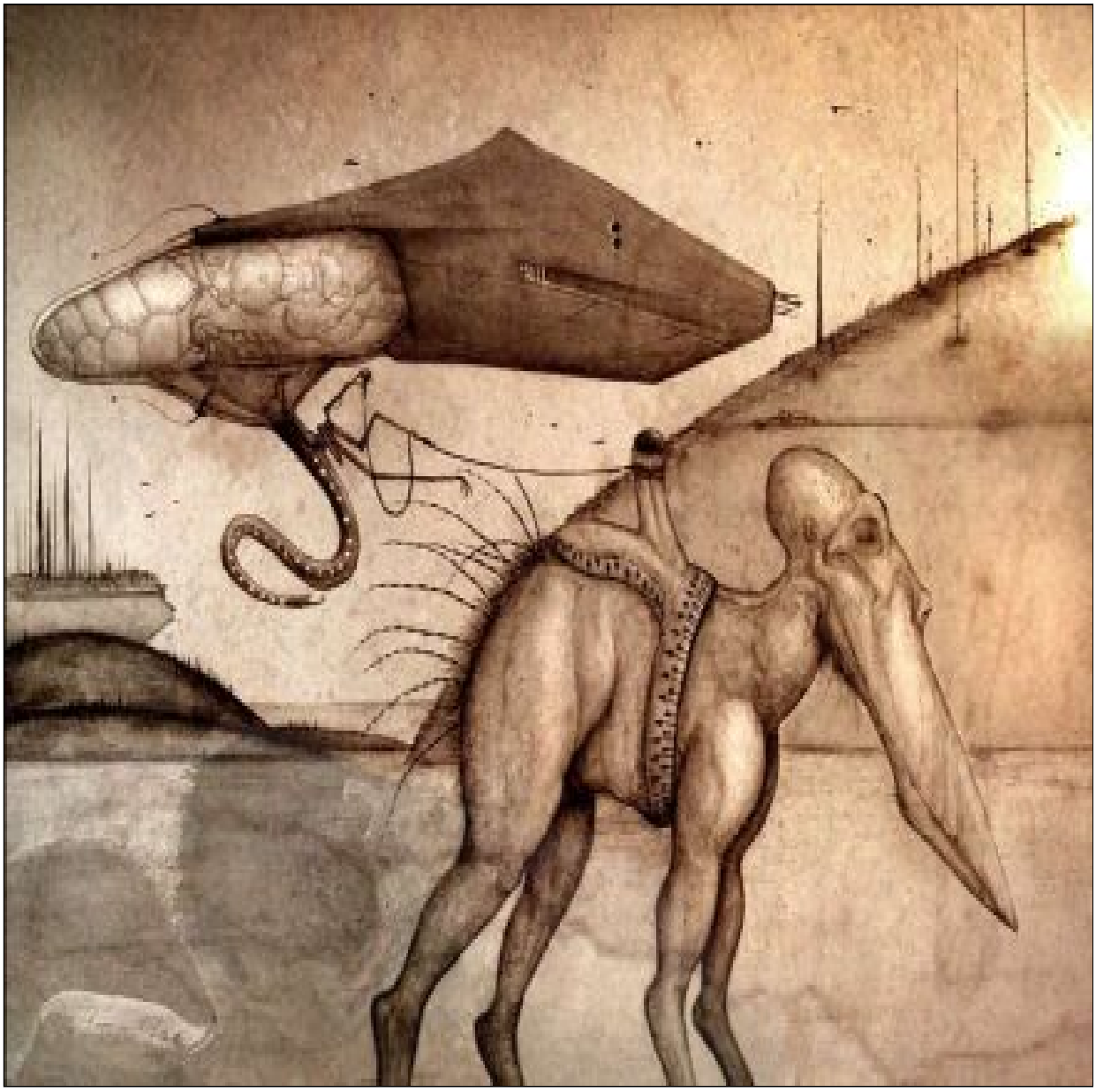
Whatever the reason, the Bug Facers endured. But they hardly resembled their original ancestors anymore. Genetic engineering, the lost art of the galaxy-threading Qu, (and later, the Tool Breeders as well,) was mastered almost as comprehensively by the Machines. Not hesitating to warp the beings which they did not really consider to be alive, they spliced their way into the Bug Facer DNA, producing generations of literal abominations. Would a woman or man of today show any apprehension towards re-assembling a computer, or even recycling trash? Such was the attitude of the triumphant Gravital.

Thus, multitudes of Subjects were produced, distorted to such an extent that even the meddling of the Qu seemed comparatively timid. Most of them were used as servants, caretakers and manual laborers. These were the lucky forms. Some sub-men were reduced to the level of cell cultures, useful only for gas exchange and waste filtering. Others were molded into completely artificial ecologies; baroque simulations that served only as entertainment. Some machines, with their still-human ambitions, took this practice into a new level and produced living works of art; doomed, one-off creatures who existed purely as biological anachronisms.

Be it as tool, slave or entertainment, Humanity narrowly held on to its biological heritage, while its Machine cousins reigned supreme for an unbelievable fifty million years.



The Bug Facer archetype, flanked by two of his twisted descendants. To his left; a phallus-bearing polydactyl, bred as a sacrificial offering in one of the many different Machine religions. To the right; a one-off work of art; designed to play its modified fingers like a set of drums while ululating the tunes of a certain pop song.



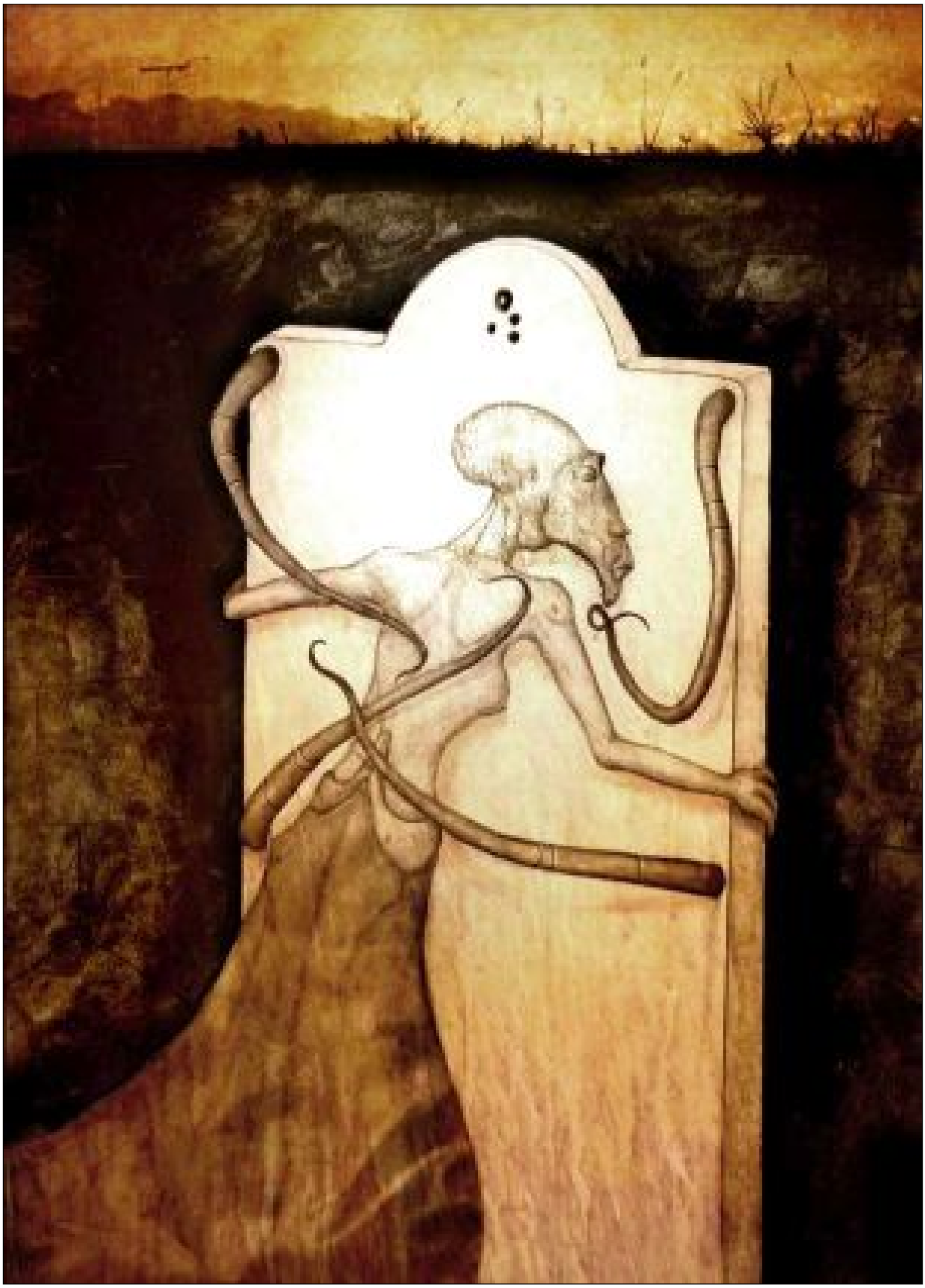
The Other Machines

Recall that despite its Galaxy-cradling might, the Machine Empire was not homogenous. It contained dozens of differing factions that did not always agree on everything, including the treatment of their downtrodden, biological Subjects.

Some Machines, over a process involving several religious, social and philosophical doctrines, began to comprehend the universality of life, and the common origin of organic and mechanical humanities. Initially such individuals lived in seclusion or withheld their beliefs from the world. They secretly engineered lineages of Subjects that could live, move and think as freely as they could. In a few memorable instances the engineers fell in love with their creations, and their martyrdom inspired other Machines to think just a little differently.

Eventually, the ideology gained enough momentum to be practiced openly in everyday life. However, the sect of Toleration soon ran into odds with their hardline, pan-mechanical rivals. The seething intolerance between the two factions finally broke when some Tolerant Machines wanted so set several worlds aside for the unrestricted development of biological life. All hell broke loose and the Machine Empire; the apparently seamless monolith of the galaxy, experienced its first short, bitter civil war.

The war did not cause any lasting damage, but it plainly illuminated one fact. The greatest entity the galaxy had ever seen was not without its problems.



The Fall of the Machines (Return of the Spacers)

In the longer run, the internal struggles of the Machine Empire just might have led to its downfall. But, there was no need to wait that long, as the Empire died a shorter, but immensely more cataclysmic death.

For a long time, the Machine and the Asteromorph Empires had been eyeing each other nervously. They hadn't yet run into open confrontations, as the Asteromorphs kept mostly to their outer-space arks and the Machine Empire occupied the planets. In almost every inhabitable solar system of the galaxy, the same upside-down tension built up between organic beings living in the void, and machines inhabiting perfectly terrestrial worlds.

Power was evenly balanced between the two rival Empires. Moreover, this balance involved forces strong enough to destroy planets en-masse. Each side knew that any kind of war would result in mutual annihilation, and only insanity could start such a conflict.

Well, the post-civil war Empire of the Machines did go insane, in a sense. In order to divert attention from internal struggles, it needed a new enemy to consolidate its rival factions against. How unwise, that this enemy came to be the Asteromorphs.

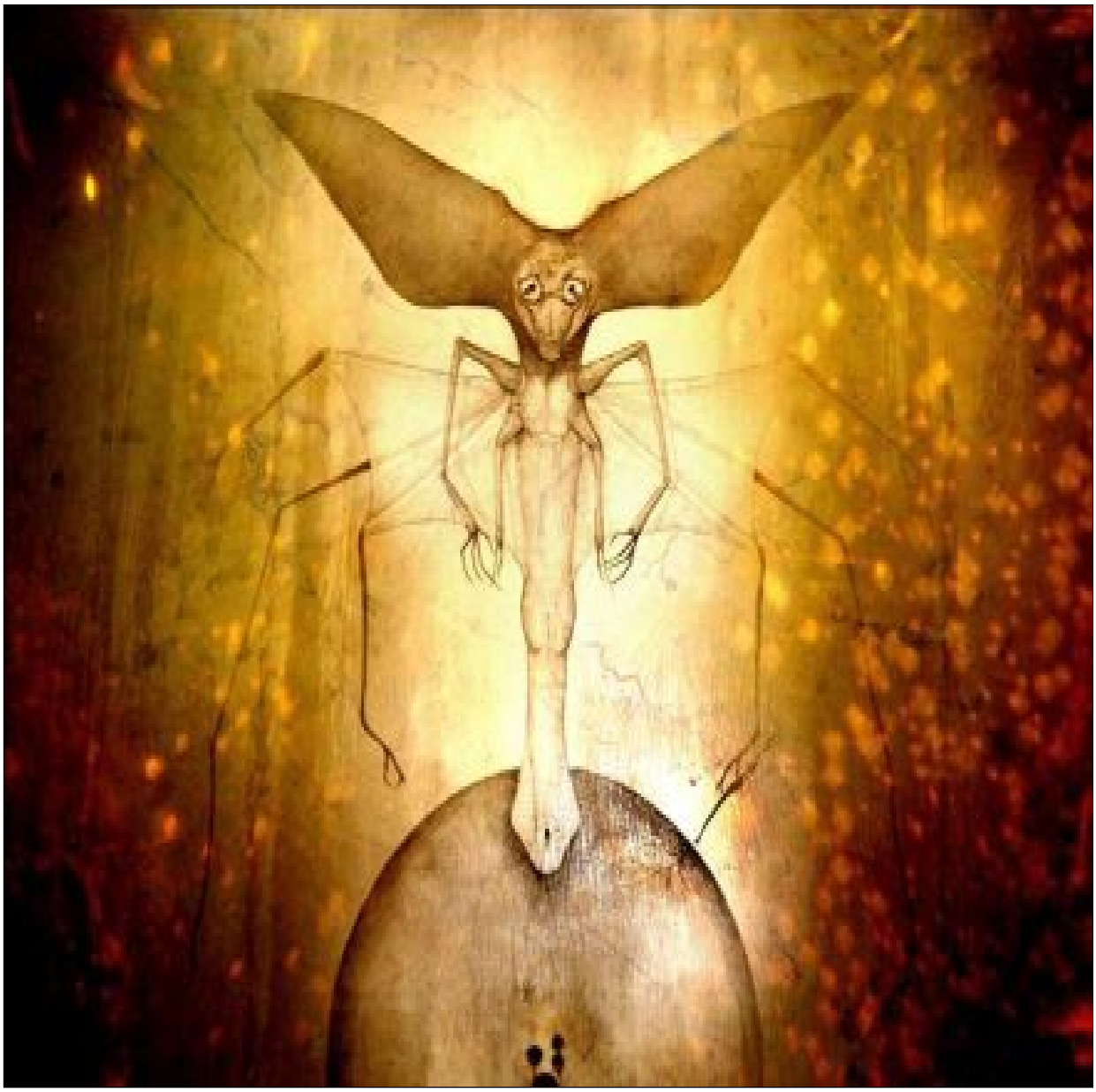
It is unnecessary and nearly impossible to describe the carnage that followed. The conflicts lasted anywhere up to a few million years, and the resulting loss of life (both mechanical and organic) made the initial Machine Genocide seem irrelevant.

When the cosmic dust settled, the winners displayed themselves. The conquerors were the Asteromorphs, changed beyond recognition after fifty million years of continual self-perfection. Their grossly hypertrophied brains stretched out like wings on either side, and their

finger-derived limbs had formed an intricate set of sails and legs. Endowed with superior technology and limitless patience, these beings almost completely destroyed the Machines, despite losing a substantial number of their own species.

The conflict also thrust the Asteromorphs into the affairs of their long-neglected human cousins. As impossible as it seemed, some of the Machines' Subjects had survived the ordeal. Now, the Asteromorphs could no longer look away.

With the Machines gone, it was up to the Asteromorphs to clean up after them. They took up the Subjects and used their genetic heritage to populate entire planets. During this age of reconstruction, which lasted for another two million years, many Asteromorph world-builders emerged as true Gods, creating inhabited worlds almost out of scratch. Their Subjects, meanwhile, became the inheritors of a truly new, war-torn Phoenix of a Galaxy.



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The Post-War Galaxy

When replenishing lost worlds, the Asteromorph gods also took measures to ensure the continued safety of their creations. The abrupt rise of the Machines had shown that unless carefully regulated, the wealth of the stars could always host a race of pan-galactic usurpers.

The Asteromorphs, watchful but ever transparent, did not want to interfere directly. Instead, they produced terrestrial versions of their own kind to regulate the galaxy. They adapted their delicate, ethereal fingers into spidery limbs, and shrunk their brains considerably to re-adjust to the rigors of gravity. The resulting sideline was stunted by Asteromorph standards, but still it produced demigods in every sense of the word.

These beings, known often as the Terrestrial Spacers or simply the Terrestrials, nurtured and controlled the development of the post-war civilizations on many planets. They acted as caretakers, prophets, kings and emperors, but also as grim reapers as the occasion dictated.

The endeavor did not always proceed as smoothly as planned, of course. Most of the time the newborn races refused to heed their mentors and in several cases even rebelled against them. Needless to say, this crime was always punished with a swift extinction. Furthermore, even the Terrestrials grew corrupted. Instead of offering guidance, Terrestrials on many planets simply played god, weaving contrived religions around themselves to shamelessly exploit their subjects. It was not ethical or even productive, but this method seemed to guarantee more stability than actually trying to bring up the new races.

This way or another, organic sentience reclaimed its dominance in the galaxy. The New Empire; managed by Terrestrials, populated by a myriad descendants of the Subjects, and overseen ultimately by the

omniscient Asteromorphs, achieved greater progress and a longer-lasting calm in the galaxy than all of its predecessors combined.

A nude Terrestrial shows the highly divergent, yet still bizarrely human anatomy that is the characteristic of this species. These particular Terrestrials maintain a religious hegemony over their clueless subjects; dressing up in elaborate veils and headgear to assert their ‘divine’ inheritance.

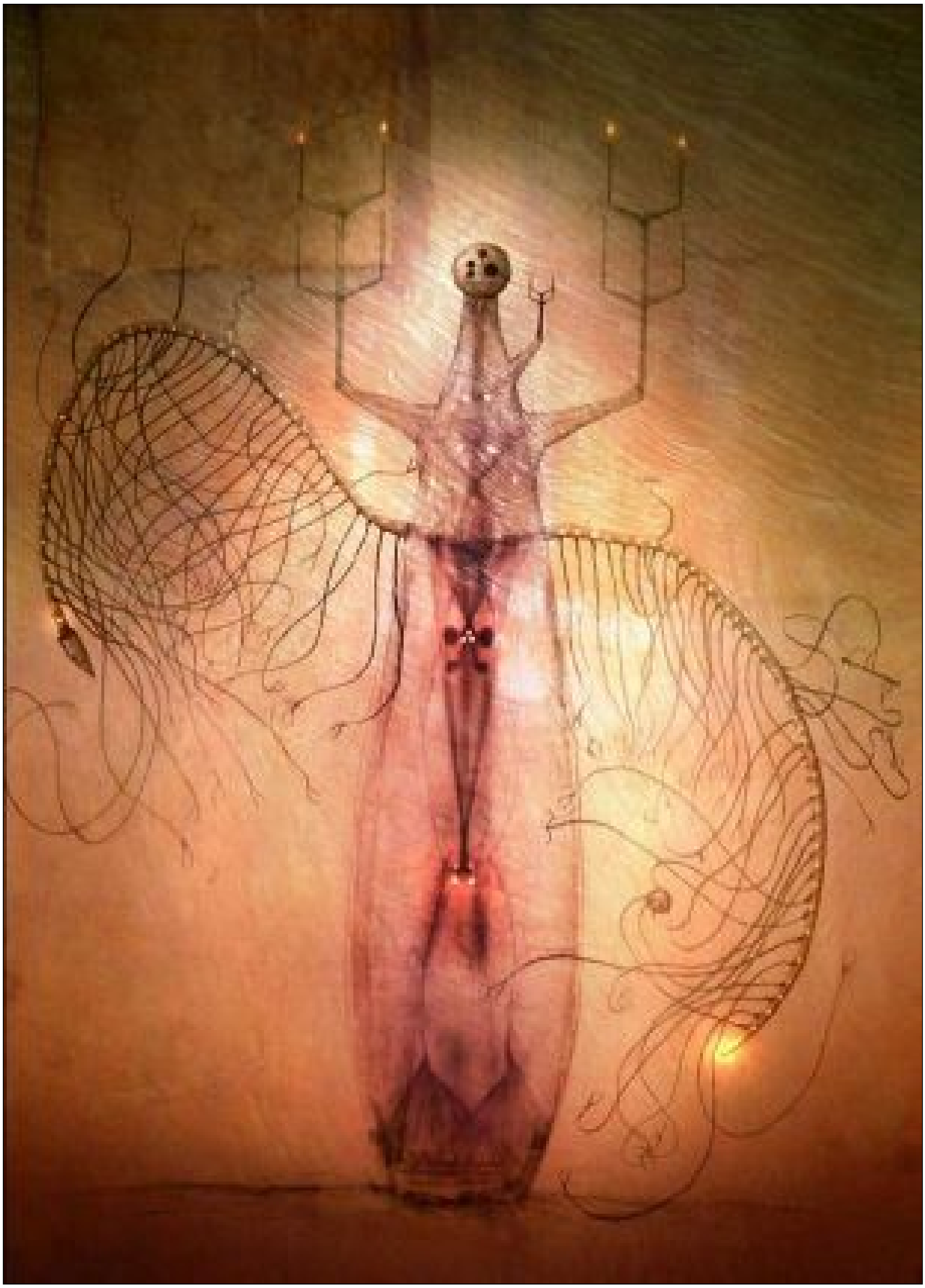
The New Machines

Long after their fall from grace, the Machines still clung on to existence. During the initial aftermath of the war, the Asteromorphs had planned to exterminate every last one of them, only to discover that the Machines were simply too useful to destroy. For millions of years they had perfected the interface between mind and machine to such an extent that they could live and operate in the most inhospitable conditions. Such beings, deprived of their galaxy-straddling power, would make invaluable contributions to research and exploration in the New Empire.

There was a sense of poetic justice in all of this. The Machines, who once distorted biological life forms to their whim, were finally treated to a similar fate. To begin with, the Asteromorphs completely scrapped their ability of self-contained gravitational manipulation; the very force that had rendered them invulnerable in the first place. They were given finite life spans and slightly numbed imaginations, so that history would not repeat itself. The degradatory nature of these changes, however, did not imply an overall regression.

Unlike their ancestors, the New Machines were endowed with nanotechnological bodies that could remodel themselves continuously, which meant that they could come in every shape and size imaginable, and then some that could not. A machine citizen could live for some time in the void of the space, conducting research, and then transform into a completely different body plan for a holiday on a cometary halo, tropical jungle or a methane ocean. He or she would also make the trip personally by growing temporary hyperdrives and ramjet engines!

Despite their breathtaking versatility, the Machines were never as common or prominent, even after completely accepting their role as lowly citizens of the New Empire. The greatest wars in conceivable history had ingrained the organics with too deep a mistrust of their mechanical neighbors, and the New Machines were always treated with a degree of discrimination. The sins of their fathers had come to shackle this most splendorous of all human species.



A machine citizen of the New Empire. She sports a dazzling pair of branching arms that suit both the latest fashion trends and her job as an artisan. Machines following fashion might seem unusual to a reader of this era, but never forget that these beings are human intelligences, only in different bodies.

Second Contact

With successive waves of machine-aided discovery and colonization, the New Empire grew exponentially. Such was the growth of wealth and progress that its description would need the use of concepts that remain unexplored today. To talk with a man of today about the comings and goings of the New Empire would be akin to giving lectures of 20th century geopolitics to a huntergatherer.

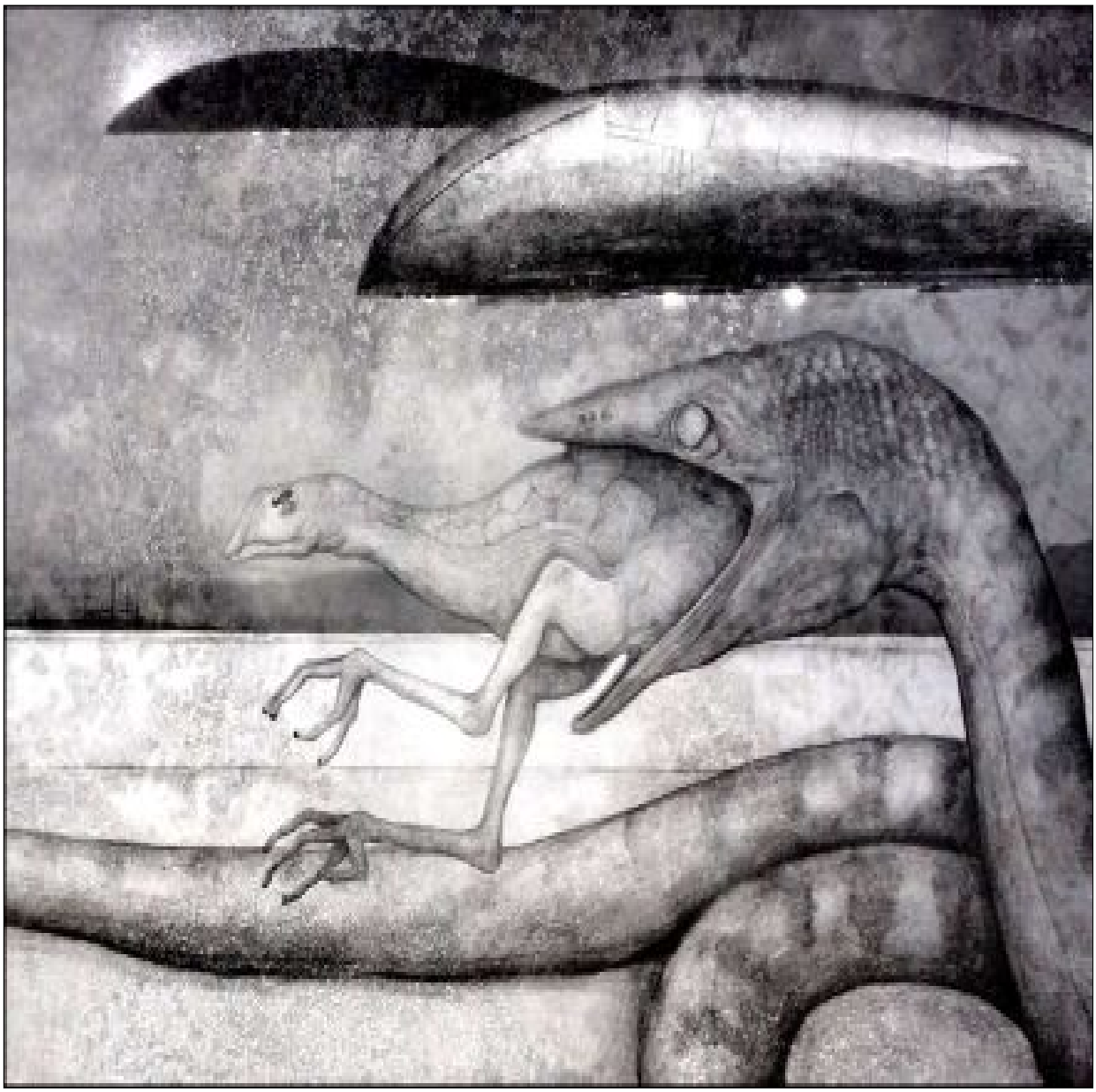
This magnificent entity was not blind to the universe around it. It tuned in its eyes, ears and sensors, and probed the events of the surrounding galaxies. The New Galactics suspected that the surrounding nebulae might also have their indigenous folk, and it was wise to contact them before a misunderstanding, or conflict could occur. On a darker side, these observations also served as lookouts for potential invaders. Even then, the memory of the Qu was not forgotten.

The discovery was eventually made. One of the neighboring galaxies was showing patterns of activity that were the unmistakable signs of a sentient organization. Some thinkers reviled in the discovery of a new civilization, while others feared a return of the Qu. Fortunately, this second encounter with an alien species proved to be a peaceful one. Perhaps the intelligences of both galaxies were finally mature enough to meet without quarreling.

The other Galaxy was dominated by connected unions of different beings, presided over by various kinds of Amphicephali; bizarre creatures that resembled giant snakes with heads on both ends, one of which bore a secondary, retractile body that they would use to

interact with the world. Apparently, they had undergone alternating series of regressions, evolutionary radiations and selfimposed genetic makeovers, just as humanity had.

With all of their wild difference, the Amphicephali were welcome. They were the first, but surely not the last.



An Amphicephalus ambassador with spaceships typical of their kind. Her strange body plan betrays an evolutionary history as complicated as that of humanity.

Earth Rediscovered

The purpose of this work is not to describe the limitless progress that followed the crossgalactic contact. One could go indefinitely, chronicling how the united galaxies re-encountered and subdued the Qu, how they cradled their suns with artificial shells, multiplying their inhabitable zones a billion-fold, how they criss-crossed interstellar space with wormholes and made travel a thing of the past. Ultimately, descendants of those beings even conquered Time itself, prolonging the existence of their minds indefinitely via rejuvenating technologies.

For a time, all men were gods.

But from (y)our vantage point, one discovery truly stood out in this orgy of advance. Compared with gargantuan achievements like the taming of space and the construction of the starshells, it was a mere blip, a revelation of long-forgotten trivia. This was the re-discovery of Earth; the birthplace of humanity, where the omnipresent Asteromorph, the star-gliding Machine, and the millions of humble resident races could all trace their origins.

It was made quietly, by a singular researcher combing the vestiges of forgotten history, decade after decade. Millions of years of wars, invasions and extinctions had buried the evidence thoroughly and comprehensively. When she finally came across irrefutable evidence, nobody was around to celebrate. That would come later.

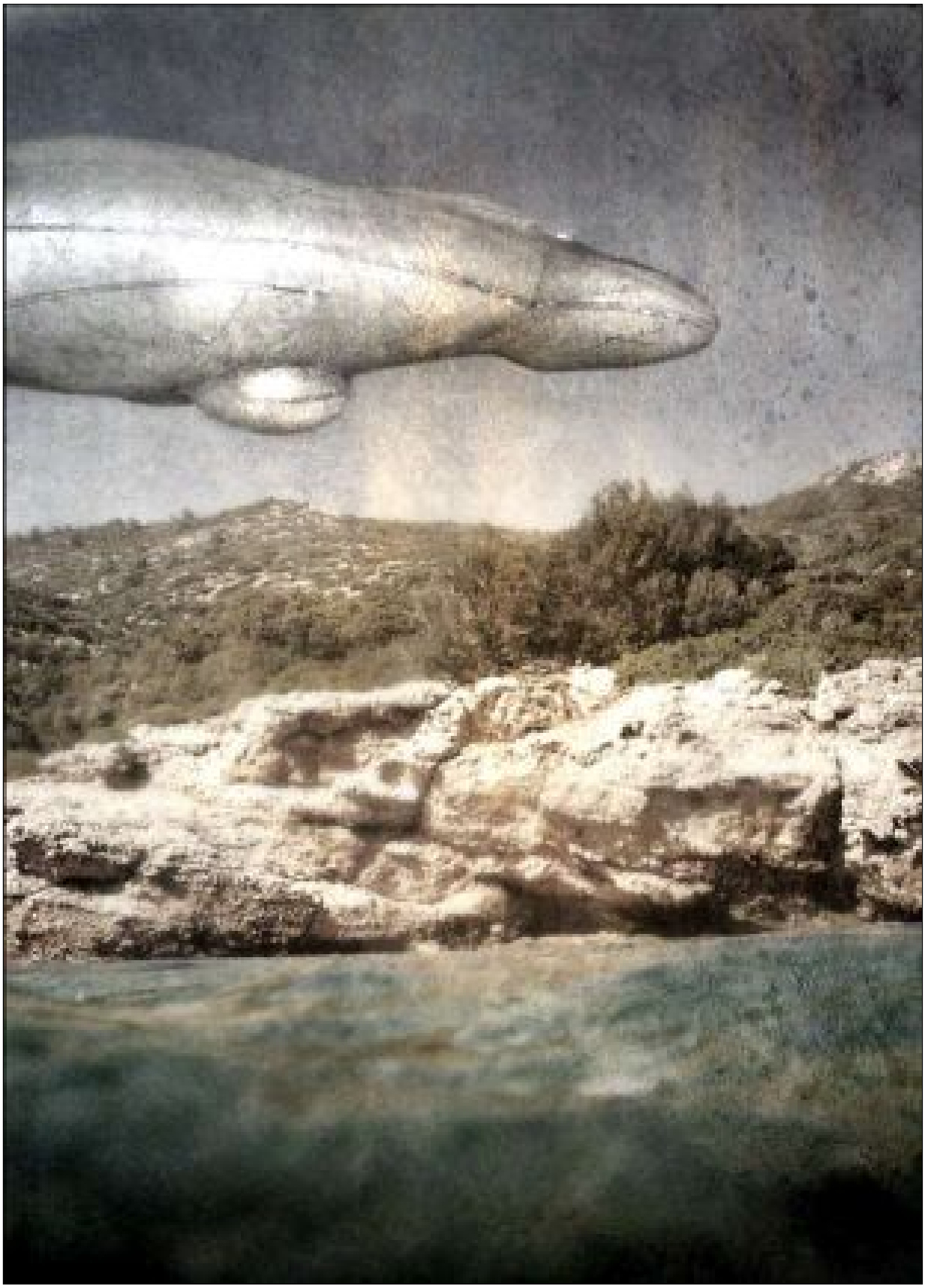
By the time of Earth’s rediscovery, humans have diverged considerably from their ancestral forms.

Return

The discovery sparked a certain amount of interest, though nowhere as much as other breakthroughs had. To most humans of the cosmos, their ancestral birthplace was simply an interesting piece of information, a piece of trivia with which they had lost all ties.

Still, a ship was sent forth, and it landed without ceremony, for now there was no intelligence left on Earth. Too far away from the main centers of population, it had been completely ignored, gone stagnant and feral. But still, it was Home.

When the explorers stepped out, human feet trod on old Earth once more; after an absence of 560 million years. Mankind was back home.



All Tomorrows

I must conclude my words with a confession. Mankind, the very species which I've been chronicling from its terrestrial infancy to its domination of the galaxies, is extinct. All of the beings which you saw on the preceding pages; from the lowly Worm to the wind-riding Sail People, from the megalomaniac Gravital to the ultimate Galactic citizens, lie a billion years dead. We are only beginning to piece the story together. What you read was our best approximation of the truth.

Why did they disappear? Perhaps it was a final, unimaginable war of annihilation, one that transcended the very meaning of "conflict". Perhaps it was a gradual break-up of the united galaxies, and every race facing their private end slowly afterwards. Or perhaps, the wildest theories suggest, it was a mass migration to another plane of existence. A journey into somewhere, sometime, something else. But the bottom line is; we honestly don't know.

Ultimately, however, what happened to Humanity does not matter. Like every other story, it was a temporary one; indeed long but ultimately ephemeral. It did not have a coherent ending, but then again it did not need to. The tale of Humanity was never its ultimate domination of a thousand galaxies, or its mysterious exit into the unknown. The essence of being human was none of that. Instead, it lay in the radio conversations of the still-human Machines, in the daily lives of the bizarrely twisted Bug Facers, in the endless love-songs of the carefree Hedonists, the rebellious demonstrations of the first true Martians, and in a way, the very life you lead at the moment.

Many throughout history were unaware of this most basic fact. The Qu, in dreams of an ideal future, distorted the worlds they came across. Later on the Gravital, with their insane desire to recreate the past, caused the ugliest massacres in the history of the galaxy. Even now, it is sickeningly easy for beings to get lost in false grand narratives, living out completely driven lives in pursuit of non-existent codes, ideals, climaxes and golden ages. In blindly thinking that their

stories serve absolute ends, such creatures almost always end up harming themselves, if not those around them.

To those like the misguided; look at the story of Man, and come to your senses! It is not the destination, but the trip that matters. What you do today influences tomorrow, not the other way around. Love Today, and seize All Tomorrows!

The Author, with a billion-year old human skull.

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